

PROFILE

## Vernon Noel Verney Optometric educator 1921–1980

Following my graduation in 1967 from Aston University in the UK and after nearly two years of private practice, I was keen to travel, so I applied for various overseas positions as an optometrist. In March 1970, I answered an advertisement for an optometrist in Brisbane, Australia.

My potential employer had asked a colleague, who was travelling to the United Kingdom to attend and speak at a conference in London, to conduct interviews for him. This colleague was Noel Verney, who had a different agenda: he was looking for a new academic staff member for what was then the Section of Optometry within the Department of Paramedical Studies at the Queensland Institute of Technology (QIT).

He happened to be travelling to the area where I lived, so I met and talked at length with him and his wife Betty. Their quiet yet attentive manner and their obvious interest in someone who was a very junior colleague impressed me greatly.

Shortly after Noel returned to Australia, he offered me a lecturing position at QIT. In those days, the selection process was rather less rigorous than it is today. The immigration process was, too. I paid 10 pounds sterling for the airfare, subject to an undertaking to stay in Australia for at least two years. Having always had the desire to teach as well as travel, I had the good sense to accept the offer. Thus began a working relationship and personal friendship with Noel, his wife and family that was tragically cut short by his premature death in 1980.

I and I'm sure many readers of this



profile, as well as the profession of optometry in Queensland and Australia, owe him much.

Noel Verney was born in 1921 into a long-established Queensland family. His father was a Growers' Agent, who had offices in the city of Brisbane. He received his secondary education at Brisbane Grammar School and qualified as an optometrist in Queensland before the outbreak of the Second World War. At that time, the course was part-time and was given at the Central Technical College in Brisbane, which was one of the forerunners of the Queensland University of Technology.<sup>1</sup>

When the Second World War came, Noel was accepted into the Empire Air Training Scheme in Canada and qualified as a navigator. As a navigator on Sunderland Flying Boats, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for his role in the evacuation of Wingate's Chindit Force from Burma. In his *History of Australian Optometry*, Charles Wright,<sup>2</sup> quotes the citation for the DFC in part as follows:

*'Flying Officer Verney showed great skill and resolution in extremely adverse circumstances, including pinpointing and landing on rivers and an uncharted lake in the mountainous terrain in monsoonal weather in very large cumbersome flying boats behind enemy lines, in 13 sorties in 30 days'.*

He also trained others in navigation, which was probably his first foray into teaching. He finished the war as Flight Lieutenant.

Following demobilisation, he returned to private practice but soon saw a need to improve his optometric qualifications. In 1948, he travelled to the United Kingdom and completed the Diploma and Higher Diploma of the British Optical Association<sup>3</sup> and also its Diploma in Orthoptics, a rare feat in such a short time.

On his return to Australia in 1949, he resumed private practice but he also became involved with the education of optometrists in Queensland. He was to lay the solid foundations on which the present-day course continues to flourish. Effectively, he was in charge of optometric education in Queensland for 30 years, from 1949 until his death in 1980.

In the year Noel Verney returned to Australia, the Queensland College of Optometry was set up by the profession. It was to provide the clinical teaching in optometry while the Central Technical College was to provide the preclinical teaching. Noel Verney was appointed the Clinician-in-Charge of the new optometry college, which at the time was a part-time appointment. He was appointed Director of Examinations in 1950 and was responsible for examinations administered by the Optometrists' Board. He became a full-time lecturer in 1952. The unusual situation of training being provided jointly by the Central Technical College and the Queensland College of Optometrists continued through the 1950s.

This 'problem' of two institutions working together to provide the optometry course was essentially resolved in 1965, when the Queensland Institute of Technology (QIT) was founded and took over the courses of the Central Technical College and many of the specialist vocational training colleges that had worked in collaboration with the technical colleges.

As a result, a full-time three-year optometry course came into being at QIT. Noel Verney was appointed Senior Lecturer and Head of the Section of Optometry within that institution. It is safe to say that he played the pre-eminent role in bringing full-time education in optometry to Queensland. In his obituary<sup>4</sup> published in the *Australian Journal of Optometry*, Lloyd Hewett remarked that Noel had immersed himself in all of the battles to improve and protect optometry and, in so doing, often worked alone behind the scenes.

He could work effectively behind the scenes because he was a person of influence and a man of style and manners. At an ANZAAS meeting in Brisbane, he entertained the optometry section at his home and the formal invitation cards instructed that 'carriages were to be ordered for 7.30 pm'. He was a member of the Naval and Military Club. He had grown up, gone to school and helped fight a war with many of those whose support and authority were needed to bring about change. Noel knew how to obtain and harness that support.

This 'influence' was also brought to bear on his students, many of whom have risen to great prominence within their profession and life in general. He was not only a teacher but also a mentor and source of inspiration. Social gatherings at his home were common and he subscribed to the belief that a complete education did not cease at the clinic door. He was an enthusiastic supporter of equal opportunity long before it became commonly acceptable.

At QIT, he developed an excellent clinical program. The course was very full and intense, a situation that improved somewhat when the four-year degree was introduced in the early 1980s and that, sadly, he did not live to see realised.

Apart from having to give the lectures in most things optometric in the early days, his main interests lay in orthoptics, low vision and the vision problems of indigenous Australians. He was appointed honorary consultant optometrist to Narbethong School for the Visually Handicapped in 1973.

In addition to his academic activities, Noel was heavily involved with the profession of optometry and allied disciplines, pursuits for which he always showed great enthusiasm. He was a councillor of the Queensland Division of Optometrists Association, then the Australian Optometric Association, and served terms as State President and National Vice-President. He was a member of the Optometrists' Registration Board from 1950 and served as its chairman. He served as Chairman of the optometry expert panel of the Federal Government's Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications and was a Queensland representative to ANZAAS. He was an active member of the Illuminating Engineering Society of Australia from 1942 and was State President for a period. He was also instrumental in recruiting other optometrists into this body, myself being one. He was awarded the Queen's Coronation and Jubilee medals for his many professional and community contributions.

Noel Verney led a full and rich life professionally and personally. He worked tirelessly for the advancement of optometry, both in terms of the education of optom-

etry students and also its standards of practice. To characterise him as a person, I can do no better than quote from Noel's obituary written by Lloyd Hewett:

*'He was a gentleman in the true sense of the word: a patron of the theatre, art and music, he imbued in his students an appreciation of the arts and graces of living.'*

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to Betty Verney for supplying me with details of Noel Verney's life, of which I was previously unaware. I am also grateful to Brian Carlton-Smith and Colin and Heather Waldron for advice and information.

#### REFERENCES

1. The Central Technical College was founded in 1908 and it provided an optometry course in conjunction with the Registration Board from 1928. The Central Technical College evolved into the Queensland Institute of Technology in 1965, which in turn became the Queensland University of Technology in 1989.
2. Wright C. History of Australian Optometry. Melbourne: Australian Optometrical Association, 1988, p182.
3. The British Optical Association was one of two optometry professional associations in England at the time. The other was an ancient guild, the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers, which was founded in 1629. They ran professional examinations in optometry, leading to the qualifications of FBOA and FSMC, respectively. The Scottish Association also provided professional examinations in optometry. They joined forces in 1980 to form the College of Optometrists, which is the body currently responsible for professional examinations in the UK. The British Optical Association had run examinations in optometry from 1895 until it disbanded with the establishment of the College of Optometrists. The Fellowship of the British Optical Association was a primary qualification for optometrists in the UK. The BOA also offered an optional higher diploma, which Noel Verney completed. The BOA also had courses in specialist aspects of optometry, in contact lenses and in orthoptics, which led to post-graduate diplomas.
4. Hewett JL. Obituary: Noel Verney. *Aust J Optom* 1980; 63: 136.

**Peter G Swann**

School of Optometry  
Queensland University of Technology