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6 September 2006 – Media release – The life of Lucy Osburn, Australia's premier nurse

Lucy Osburn, the founder of modern, lay nursing in Australia and friend of Henry Parkes, battled with surgeons, was vilified by the press, became the subject of a Royal Commission, was embroiled in a royal shooting and ultimately rejected by her heroine, Florence Nightingale.

In a new book about Osburn, Judith Godden, historian and senior lecturer in the University of Sydney's School of Public Health, paints a picture of the early colony grappling with very modern problems: professional women's fight for status, power struggles in the workplace and media scandals.

Osburn (1836-1891) learned her vocation at Florence Nightingale's school of nursing in London, and she was sent at Parkes' request to the colony to introduce the Nightingale's methods the Sydney Infirmary (later the Sydney Hospital). But her relationship with her mentor became increasingly fraught as Nightingale grew concerned at the public relations disasters that followed in Osburn's wake.

Osburn's habit of dressing like a nun, wearing a cross necklace and assuming the title Lady Superior aroused hostility in a colony already engulfed in religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants. Although she was passionate about patient care and improving living conditions for her nurses, Godden also details how her nurses turned against her and Osburn's clashes with male managers over who would provide clean water and remove bedpans in the lice- and vermin-ridden hospital.

Godden has produced a "riveting read, a historical tour de force and a page-turner," according to Anne Marie Rafferty, from the Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery, Kings College, London. "In the hands of such as fine historian as Judith Godden, Lucy's life is deftly and dramatically drawn."

Lucy Osburn, a lady displaced will be launched this evening by the Governor of New South Wales, Her Excellency Marie Bashir, at an event hosted by the Historic Houses Trust.

Editor's note

Dr Godden's research was supported by a C. H. Currey Memorial Fellowship from the State Library of New South Wales.

Lucy Osburn, a lady displaced: Florence Nightingale's envoy to Australia

By Judith Godden

ISBN: 1-920898-39-5

Price: \$A34.95 plus postage

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