

## CONTESSA DIAMANTINA ROMA, LADY BOWEN

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### Abstract:

Contessa Diamantina Roma married Sir George Bowen on 28/04/1856 at Corfu, Ionian Islands. He was appointed first Governor of Queensland and they arrived in Brisbane on December 10, 1859 and declared Queensland a separate state. Lady Bowen was a beautiful, caring, conscientious lady who stimulated the formation of benevolent and charitable organizations in Queensland (eg Lady Bowen Lying-In Hospital, Diamantina Orphanage). The Orphanage became run-down and a new one opened at Woolloongabba, Brisbane. Then in 1901, it was translated into the Diamantina Hospital for Chronic Disease, 1943 the South Brisbane Auxiliary Hospital and ultimately the new Princess Alexandra Hospital in 1956. On her departure in 1868 she was given a very special and exuberant farewell.

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Lady Bowen was born in Zante (Zakynthos), an Ionian Island in 1833, tenth of eleven children and the only surviving daughter of Count Giorgio-Candiano Roma and his wife (the former Contessa Orsola di Balsama, daughter of another Zantiot nobleman).(Ref 1). Count Roma was President of the Ionian Senate (1850-6) and titular head of the Ionian Islands Republic; also Queen Victoria appointed him the Island's Poet Laureate. The Roma family origins can be traced back through Crete and Venice to 13<sup>th</sup> Century Rome. Premarriage she led a gracious, civilized and highly privileged life, when the Ionian Islands were a British Protectorate (1815-1864).

In another Ionian Island, Corfu, the Contessa met and fell in love with an Englishman – George Bowen, a first class honours classics graduate from Oxford, and a man with a love for Greece, its culture, and both ancient and modern language – a real philhellene. He came to Corfu in 1847 as President of the University of the Ionian Islands, and in 1854 became Chief Secretary of Government.

Two years later on 28/04/1856 Contessa Diamantina Roma married George Bowen in the chapel of the Palace of St Michael and St George in Corfu. The ceremony was conducted by his brother the Rev. Edward Bowen, Rector of Lower Wigborow, Essex. A signatory was Sir John Young, Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands (and later Governor of N.S.W.) Twelve days later Bowen was knighted. As the future of Ionian Islands was temporarily solved in 1859, Bowen was appointed (by Bulwer Lytton, with letters patent and Order-in-Council on June 6, that year) first Governor (“Captain-General, Vice-Admiral and Governor-in-Chief”) of the new Colony of Queensland). (Ref 4, 5, 11). They sailed (with daughter Nina) via Sydney on the sloop H.M.S. Cordelia. During the voyage both Sir George and Lady Bowen suffered severe and prolonged sea sickness, but they arrived in Moreton Bay at sunset, Friday December 9. They were met at the mouth of the Brisbane River by a small welcoming party in a small R.N. paddle-wheel steamer, Breadalbane; the Bowens then travelled on that ship further up the Brisbane River on a hot Saturday 10/12/59. En route up the Brisbane River, they were enthusiastically greeted by paddle steamers filled with sightseers, fireworks, flags; even one local citizen (Mr Gaskarth) renamed his yacht the Lady Bowen and flew the Greek flag in honour of her homeland.(Ref 1,13). Then four thousand people lined the river banks near the gardens and gave them a most enthusiastic and joyous welcome, after which they were taken by vice-regal carriage along dusty streets to the temporary vice-regal residence (Adelaide House, vacated and leased for 3 years to them by the owner Dr William Hobbs, Government Health Officer and Surgeon; now The Deanery, St John's Cathedral); there Diamantina held her baby, Nina (aged 16 months), high over Adelaide Street for the crowd to see.(Ref 4) (Ref 1). Later that day Sir George read from the same veranda the proclamation of the State of Queensland.

For her part, Lady Bowen carried out her official duties with self-discipline, conscientiousness, compassion and aplomb. Her charming manner endeared her to all Queenslanders, and throughout her eight years in Queensland she was noted for her beauty with elegant clothes and hairstyle. Ten days after arrival Diamantina accompanied Sir George to Ipswich escorted by 400 people on horseback, but in fact during the term, Lady Bowen rarely travelled with Sir George on country tours; she was very uncomfortable in the humid heat of Queensland. In May 1862 she and her husband became the first occupants in the elegant and spacious “New” Government House, Gardens Point with its beautiful arc of Ionian columns and built in sandstone and Brisbane porphyry in the Classic Revival Style. She was a charming and talented hostess and personally selected and planted many of the plants in the gardens; plants and gardens fascinated Diamantina. Even daughter Nina at the age of 5 years realized the gardens meant a lot to her mother. In the files of the Queensland Women's Historical Association is a letter from her to her mother who was away in the country. The letter tells her “that the flower garden looks well” and Premier Robert Herbert assures Lady Bowen by a note on the bottom of the letter that it is written by “her daughter's fair hand and out of her own head”. (Ref.13). The brilliantly hued creeper “bignonia venusta” covered a cottage near Government House and for a long time was known as “Lady Bowen's Creeper”. It was a most beautiful garden with a vineyard and all varieties of fruit; on Sundays, children were allowed to walk in it. From distant Camden N.S.W. the botanical enthusiast Sir William MacArthur sent her plants which she acknowledged by letter written in a delicate sloping script:

“My dear Sir William MacArthur,

Many thanks for the beautiful collection of phlox that you were kind enough to send me. I shall take good care of them. My garden is the place where I spend all my spare time and it is a great pleasure to me. I wish that you would come and pay us a visit. Sir George and I will be very glad to see you at Government House. You would then have an opportunity of seeing my garden and judge by yourself what we can do in Queensland. Where Government House is now, and all the garden around it, was quite wild four years ago. If you were to come to Brisbane we shall be very glad to see you after April, as it is too hot before that time for anyone to enjoy the climate. From May to September the climate is perfect.

With repeated thanks, believe me,

Yours truly, Diamantina Bowen”.

This letter gives insight into her politeness, sensitivity and some of her pleasures (Ref 4). Another example of her personality and charm is seen in the observation by Mr Matthew Henry Marsh of Maryland, Dalveen, a guest at the first ever Government House Ball celebrating the Queen’s birthday on 16<sup>th</sup> June, 1862 – “The Government House is beautiful, and it seems as if the spirit of Greek taste has been given to the colony by Lady Bowen”. A newspaper report on the ball noted “The display was of a description hitherto unapproached in this colony. The three central rooms on the ground floor were given up to the dancers; the large room to the left of the entrance hall was devoted to the purpose of refreshment, where during the evening tea and coffee on one table, and sherry and claret at the other, were dispensed to all corners. The drawing room afforded a grateful refuge for the dowagers as well as those ladies who were disinclined for the dance”. Continuing, the report notes “the brilliance of the lights, the gay and tasteful costumes of the ladies and the sprinkling of uniforms provided by the Consular Corps, the Army, Navy and Volunteers, presented a spectacle such as had never before been witnessed in the Colony” (Ref 13). As well, reflecting on her tastes, Lady Bowen was a collector of Chippendale furniture, was an accomplished musician with much admired singing and piano playing and she encouraged others by attending concerts. She is quoted “of all the arts, music has always been the dearest friend to me”.

Significant insight into the life of Lady Bowen in Queensland (as well as some insight into Sir George) can be gleaned from the letters and diaries of two close friends during their term in Brisbane. They are Mrs Eliza O’Connell and Mr Robert Herbert. Mrs O’Connell was the wife of Maurice who was knighted in 1868 for his services as Commander of Volunteers in 1859, President of the Legislative Council of Queensland 1860-1879 and acted as exofficio deputy to the Governor on four occasions. She kept meticulous diaries, and unpublished excerpts from her 1866 diary have been seen by the author (Ref.8). She and Lady Bowen were very close, as she reveals almost daily private and official contact. Always she was present at the Bowen children’s birthday celebrations and often went shopping together. The Bowens frequently holidayed at the coastal Sandgate in Jordan Cottage, Eagle Terrace. One vacation from January to March 1866 was well remembered by early settlers (Ref.3) and in Mrs Eliza O’Connell’s diaries (Ref. 8). During that vacation Mrs O’Connell describes a visit on March 14 when Dr Hobbs was called and found her to have Cow Fever. On November 26, 1866 she notes “I think Sir George must be tiring of seeing me every day, but as soon as dear Lady Bowen is gone he will not see me so often.” Lady Bowen departed for Sydney the next day. Frequently Lady Bowen went away alone for unexplained reasons and of variable duration of up to one year. These absences suggested some unhappiness with Sir George, or discomfort in the Australian heat or problems in her emotional health. Sir George did comment publicly about the absence for one year from Victoria as “a short visit to Europe necessitated by state of health”.

Robert Herbert was appointed by Sir George as his private secretary (July 1859), chief secretary (December 10, 1859) and elected first Premier of Queensland in 1860 remaining until 1866. Frequent letters were written by him to his family in England, and were published in 1977 by Knox (Ref.5). In these, he describes Lady Bowen in glowing terms of her beauty (eg. Letter No. 9 of July

18, 1863 accompanying a photograph of Lady Bowen “her beauty is more in expression than feature”, of her maternal pride and love of her children (eg Letter No. 56, December 1865) in which he writes “Lady Bowen often asks me if I have told you about Nina’s accomplishments’, then describes in detail Nina’s piano playing abilities, and on Diamantina’s musical abilities (eg. Letter No. 23 of July 17, 1864) in which he states “I like to receive good music, either songs or for the piano, for she (Lady Bowen) is a splendid pianiste....and plays and sings difficult things at sight”). In the letters it is clear that he greatly admired her. On Sir George, he indicates his nearly daily meetings are time consuming, wasteful and sometimes boring, and as well, exposes that he was impatient, frustrated and disappointed by failing to receive early promotion from Queensland to a more prestigious and senior Governorship. He describes him with important perception in Letter No. 70 of 1866 as “Sir George Bowen’s lucid intervals are rarer than they used to be ..... Lady Bowen still looks young and pretty, but is not very strong. The summer heat and her husband’s eccentricities are trying to her health.”

The Bowens had spent eight years in Queensland during which Brisbane had grown from 4,000 to a lusty embryonic city of 15,000. Three of the Bowen’s children (Zoe Caroline (8 months after arrival), Agnes Herbert (2 years later) and George William Howard (21 months later) were born in Brisbane.

Although much of Lady Bowen’s time in Queensland was in bearing and caring for her children, she fulfilled her official role by initiating Thursday morning receptions between 1200 and 1400 hrs. After one reception she is described by Katie Hume as “very ladylike and agreeable with a slight and pretty foreign accent”. (Ref.6).

In another example of the official role, Lady Bowen turned the first sod for the construction of Queensland’s and Australia’s first railway from Ipswich to Grandchester (50 kms) on February 25, 1864; The Avonside locomotive that hauled the colony’s first passenger train was named the “Lady Bowen”.

Also, she initiated and worked for several charities, to do something for mothers less fortunate than she. Examples of her charities are Lady Bowen Lying-In Hospital, founded in 1864, and Diamantina Orphanage at Greenhills (now Roma Street Goods yards) later in 1883 rebuilt and relocated to Woolloongabba, now Princess Alexandra Hospital. As well, she founded the Diamantina Home for Incurables and was Patron to the Servants Home (established 1863) for training of servants from young women of good character; and she was closely involved with the Sunday School attached to St John’s Pro-Cathedral (then at Queen’s Park, George Street) at which her three Brisbane born children were christened. All of these benevolent activities came easily and naturally to this very caring woman. (Ref 1, 4, 11, 13, 14).

Before her departure from Queensland, 120 married women subscribed to give her a diamond necklace as a memento of “the admiration and regard which the English ladies of this colony feel for the “Lady of the Greek Isles” who has so gracefully presided over them.” In a farewell address they declared “Eight years ago you came among us as a stranger and foreigner. You leave us having won the hearts of many and the goodwill of all. The poor, the destitute, the afflicted and the orphans have alike shared your sympathy”.

Another 120 Queenslanders – unmarried women and girls – also subscribed to give her a bracelet (Fig 1), declaring “The influence of your virtues and example will dwell with us when you have departed for another land”.

A further example of the high regard for Lady Bowen came from All Hallows Convent, which was started by the Sisters of Mercy in 1861 in a lovely two story stone house quite close to Adelaide House where the Governor and Lady Bowen lived until 1862. Lady Bowen attended many of its functions, but after she had presented prizes just prior to her departure, she showed her appreciation of the work by the Sisters by donating a lovely pastel painting of herself (Fig 2). At the time she was aged about 34 years, but most observers believe she looked much younger; this gives some

confirmation for the folklore that she constantly had her hair in ringlets to make her look younger. It is the only painting of her in Queensland, and has been carefully restored. This added to a previous probable gift of a pretty Limoges tea set. In return, the Sisters gave her an illuminated address and an Irish harp brooch in Queensland gold set with pearls and emeralds. (Ref 10).

On departure on 4.1.1868 from Brisbane the Bowens walked from Government House via adjacent Brisbane Botanical Gardens cheered by thousands of Queenslanders to board the government steamer "Platypus" in the Brisbane River. Reports indicate that Lady Bowen was overwhelmed with emotion at parting from her home and friends of eight years. Apparently she never raised her head through the gardens and was sobbing bitterly and scarcely able to walk. On reaching the jetty she broke down and needed to be carried to her cabin on the "Platypus" (Ref 1, 4, 11, 13). The next day's Brisbane Courier noted in the Editorial of the Bowens "Ever since she has been in the colony she has identified herself in the most hearty and zealous manner with every good and charitable work which has been set on foot, and not a few have been originated and warmly promoted by her efforts."

Mrs Campbell Praed (in her book "MY Australian Girlhood", published in 1902 (Ref 12) has this memory of Lady Bowen "the chatelaine of Government House". "A Cottage stood at the end of the garden and it was occupied one summer by the Governor's wife, a young and beautiful Greek fairy princess, another Fair Inez who seemed to have stepped straight out of a poetry book and dazzled the eyes of a pack of rough bush children. Never had we ever seen anyone faintly resembling this gracious being, with her kindly smile, a soft foreign accent, about whom everything from the bow of ribbon in her hair to the filmy pocket handkerchief with its monogram seemed to exhale an odour of romance. Strange indeed must have been the crudities of Australian life to this gifted Greek lady whose brilliant accomplishments and delicate charm might have seemed somewhat out of place in this primitive colony just given a name and an existence of its own".

Unfortunately the impressions of Queensland by Lady Bowen are not available, as hundreds of her letters to family and friends in Zante are now lost. They were preserved for 80 years in the Roma family villa, but were destroyed in the earthquakes in Ionian Islands in 1953. (Ref 4, 11).

Whilst Sir George was Governor General of N.Z. from 1868-1873, Diamantina maintained her lifestyle and interests. Then when he was appointed Governor of Victoria in 1873 they returned to Australia until 1879: Now aged 40 years she became the "grande dame" and Melbourne gossip writers were impressed e.g. "Her English was picturesque, her manner regal and she was the subject of mingled awe and admiration in the somewhat unsophisticated world of the colonies". Another paper rhapsodized "A Creature as exotic as a bird of paradise, still a beauty, with black dazzling eyes, a flawless cream complexion and a figure that, even in the dresses of the period, was the envy of many younger matrons in the Government House circle".

In 1879 she was assaulted outside the Athanaeum Club in Collins Street by a deranged, insane woman (a fortune teller named Esther Gray). This caused considerable pains and anguish and remained a topic of conversation in Melbourne for 2-3 years (Ref 4, 11, 13).

Then another farewell in 1879 as Sir George was appointed Governor of Mauritius. At the farewell banquet in Melbourne Town Hall, Marcus Clarke's poem "Victoria's Fairwell to Lady Bowen" was sung to music composed by Alfred Plumpton.

When in Mauritius, Lady Bowen's eldest daughter, Diamantina (Nina) married a Queensland grazier, Allan Campbell. Then after a period in Hong Kong where Sir George was Governor they settled in London. Diamantina and her two unmarried daughters were regular worshippers at the Greek Orthodox Church. In 1893, aged 60 years, she developed Acute Bronchitis, died, and was buried in the Bowen family grave in Kensall Green cemetery, London (Ref 9). Although three of Diamantina's children were born in Australia and another married an Australian, they and their children settled in England. The emerald bracelet given to her by the Queensland girls has returned to the Queensland Women's Historical Association (Ref 1, 13).

Lady Bowen is a heroine for the Greek community, being the first Greek lady in Queensland (but not the first immigrant who is regarded as Evgenious Genatas). A life size bronze statue by Philip Piperides (Fig 3) donated by Mr Angelo Efsthatis, C.B.E., is erected outside the Greek Club, West End, Brisbane, as a sign of love and respect for her. It was unveiled by Governor Sir Walter Campbell on September 22, 1989 (Ref 9). As well, another senior Queensland Greek, Mr Christos Freeleagus, wrote in Athens in 1922 "The excellent Greek girl who had married an English nobleman, and found herself at the antipodes, at such a remote land, and at such a long distance from her home, continued to remain a genuine Greek girl, and has fully honoured and glorified Hellensim in practice, in that other foreign land."(Ref 2). Further is the following conclusion by Hugh Gilchrist in "Australians and Greeks" – "In Retrospect, Diamantina appears as a woman of poise, serenity and kindness, with a degree of reserve. Her daughters were devoted to her, but her daughter-in-law found her a little terrifying. Agnes regarded her mother as the perfect wife of a Governor, and believed that without her as a hostess and helpmate Sir George's career would have been insignificant. Clearly, she had a talent for entertaining guests and, in addition to a passion for her garden and an interest in music, she collected objets d'art, acquiring Chippendale furniture at a time when England spurned it, and in Hong Kong assembling a fine collection of Netsuki carvings.

Self disciplined, compassionate, devoted to duty, she does not emerge from the record as a person of boldness, gaiety or imagination" (Ref.4).

Finally, Lady Bowen is remembered by Queenslanders when various Governments named after her a hospital (Diamantina), a street (Roma Street) and a park (Lady Bowen Park) in Brisbane, a Western Queensland town of Roma, and a North Queensland river (Diamantina River) and shire (Diamantina Shire). Then in Victoria named after her is the Diamantina Falls, in Canberra – Diamantina Street, and an early riverclass frigate H.M.A.S. Diamantina has carried on her name by discovering a deep ocean cleft off Western Australia – the Diamantina Trench.

This important contribution to Queensland and Australia's history by Contessa Diamantina Roma, Lady Bowen, is highlighted now because the Princess Alexandra that began its life as the Diamantina Hospital for Chronic Diseases opened at Woolloongabba, Brisbane on August 5, 1901.

During the Foundation Day celebrations on 5 August 2004, the Diamantina Health Care Museum will be opened in the only remaining building from the original Diamantina hospital, the Dispenser's House.

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Photographs by Des Lund, Senior Photographer, Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane.

- Fig.1      Bracelet given on departure from Queensland: 1868.  
Now at Queensland Women's Historical Association, Brisbane.
- Fig.2      Pastel painting of Lady Bowen: 1867 Allen.  
On fine paper marouflaged to linen.  
Kindly made available by the Principal, All Hallow's School, Brisbane.
- Fig.3      Life size bronze statue of Lady Bowen by Philip Piperides: 1989. Erected outside the  
Greek Club, Brisbane.