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OBITUARY



Jill Roe (1940–2017)

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On 20 January 2017 a large crowd of family members, friends and colleagues filled the picturesque Pearl Beach Memorial Hall on the New South Wales Central Coast for the funeral of the highly regarded and much-loved Australian historian Jillian Isobel (Jill) Roe. She had died eight days earlier at the nearby home she shared with her partner of more than four decades and fellow historian Beverley (Bev) Kingston. Professor Emerita of Modern History at Macquarie University, Jill received many honours, including Officer of the Order of Australia, Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, Fellow of the Federation of Australian Historical Societies, Emeritus Curator at the State Library of New South Wales and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Medal.¹ Speakers at the funeral discussed her varied achievements encompassing teaching, research, scholarship, writing, leadership in collaborative projects, and service to community and professional organisations. They recalled her charm, friendship, persuasiveness and warm sense of humour.

Born on 10 November 1940 at Tumby Bay in South Australia's Eyre Peninsula, Jill was the daughter of a farmer and a nurse. She quite often spoke about her Eyre Peninsula childhood. She did so, frequently with delightful vignettes, when Baiba Berzins and I travelled with her during October 2013 to remote places such as Pygery and Yallunda Flat where she and members of her family lived, worked and enjoyed themselves. Our journey revealed her continuing and powerful sense of local identity. While she said in 2004 that from an early age she knew 'there was a bigger world' and rebelled against her background, she 'never rejected it'.²

After an education at schools in the Eyre Peninsula and Adelaide, she graduated from the University of Adelaide and the Australian National University. In 1967 she became a founding staff member at Sydney's Macquarie University, where she taught Australian, British and social policy history until her retirement in 2003. Between 1994 and 1995 she was Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard University. From the beginning at Macquarie she showed, as her senior colleague Bruce Mansfield later observed, the strong dislike of 'flabbiness or short cuts or second best'³ that together with a deep respect for sound arguments based on evidence characterised her career. She was an encouraging and inspiring teacher, mentor, postgraduate supervisor,

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¹A comprehensive summary of Jill's career before late 2014 is in *Who's Who in Australia 2015* (East Melbourne: AAP Directories, 2014), 1974.

²'An Interview with Jill Roe', *Australian Humanities Review* 33 (2004). Accessed 18 January 2017. <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-August-2004/roe.html>.

³Bruce Mansfield, *Summer is Almost Over... a Memoir* (Barton: Barton Books, 2012), 93.

conference speaker and public lecturer who positively influenced the lives of numerous History students and historians.

Jill's many publications include well-received books, book chapters and articles on Australian regional, social policy, urban, women's and religious history, and the life and works of the Australian writer Miles Franklin. She also wrote 20 *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB) entries. Her edited *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901–1975* (1976) and sole-authored *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879–1939* (1986) are still admired and referred to. Her final book, *Our Fathers Cleared the Bush: Remembering Eyre Peninsula* (2016), sensitively combines history with personal memoir in capturing what she describes as 'some key aspects of, and moments in, the regional experience'.⁴

Her most substantial publication is *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography* (2008). Described as magisterial and monumental, it is erudite and extensively researched. Jill shared Franklin's strong commitment to feminism, saying that she 'taught me a lot about Australian culture and the position of women in it'.⁵ Among the prestigious prizes *Stella Miles Franklin* received was the 2010 Magarey Medal for Biography. As the citation for Jill's 2013 award of a higher Doctorate of Letters from Macquarie University explains, the biography and her other publications on Franklin 'change the way Australian culture must be understood and interpreted for future generations' through their 'arguments for the achievements of one of its formative figures'.⁶ A defender of historical biography, she argued that the study of individual lives not only resulted in useful knowledge but also allowed for innovative interdisciplinary approaches and the examination of important abstract questions.

Related to Jill's concern with biography was her role as the first female chair of the ADB's Editorial Board from 1996 to 2006 in successfully guiding the dictionary through a period when it encountered serious challenges. The ADB, she said in 2004, was 'one of those collective enterprises that's part of the profession but it's come to be more and more important as an enterprise', noting that important books and articles had emerged from it.⁷ She oversaw and helped obtain funds for the establishment of its online edition, now a much-used historical resource. She was also an active member of the ADB's New South Wales Working Party and of the team that secured funding for and helped supervise production of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography Supplement 1580–1980* published in 2005.

Given her reputation as a teacher, it is not surprising that Jill contributed at the national level to initiatives aimed at ensuring high standards in History education. She was a member of the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee Academic Standards Panel (History) between 1988 and 1991, co-authored the 2009 study *Historical Thinking in Higher Education: An ALTC Discipline-Based Initiative* and in a

⁴Jill Roe, *Our Fathers Cleared the Bush: Remembering Eyre Peninsula* (Mile End: Wakefield Press, 2016), ix.

⁵Ramona Koval, 'Vale Professor Jill Roe, Writer and Historian'. Accessed 25 January 2017. <https://ramonakoval.com/2017/01/18/vale-professor-jill-roe-writer-and-historian/>.

⁶'Higher Doctorate for Biographer and Historian Professor Emerita Jill Roe', Macquarie University. Accessed 24 January 2017. <http://www.mq.edu.au/newsroom/2013/04/19/higher-doctorate-for-biographer-and-historian-professor-emerita-jill-roe/>.

⁷An Interview with Jill Roe'.



Figure 1. AHA President (1998–2002) Jill Roe, with an edition of *History Australia*. Source: Photo by Effy Alexakis, 2004. © Effy Alexakis. Used with permission.

range of capacities worked with the History Teachers Association of Australia to promote History in schools.

She cared deeply about and was actively involved in historical organisations, seeing them as crucial to her discipline's advancement both professionally and in the wider community. She was President of the Australian Historical Association (AHA) and the History Council of New South Wales, Vice President of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, and Patron of the Jessie Street National Women's Library. I found when serving with Jill on the AHA and History Council executives that her leadership was highly consultative and graced with her characteristic wit. Had it not been for her encouragement and the stimulation of working with her, some other executive members and I would probably never have been actively involved in either organisation. She pursued ambitious agendas and ensured that decisions were made and implemented efficiently. She involved cultural institutions such as national and state archives and libraries, community and professional historians outside academia, and school teachers.

Jill's achievements as AHA President between 1998 and 2002 deserve particular attention because they so revealingly illuminate her commitment, energy and vision. With Martyn Lyons, she made the successful bid for the International Committee of Historical Sciences conference, which she called the History Olympics, held in Sydney during 2005. The Serle Award was inaugurated. The AHA's own conferences attracted large numbers of participants. She was responsible for sounder administrative arrangements and the inspired appointment of Robyn Arrowsmith as the AHA's administrative officer. Portfolios were given to executive members. Website development received an urgent priority. She was responsible for closer relations with the

National Archives of Australia and the National Library of Australia. Links were enhanced with national historians' associations in New Zealand and South Africa. She introduced affiliate membership and oversaw a 'State of History' survey. She was keen that the AHA embraced historians outside the larger states and historians in Australia rather than just of Australia. The AHA's Jill Roe Prize for postgraduate students is an appropriate honour given her belief that the Association should reach out to them. Although *History Australia* first appeared after she was AHA President, she was much involved in initial discussions about the new journal. She noted when launching the first issue in February 2004 that it was 'full of interesting and valuable material'. The idea, she continued, that the AHA would have its own journal had 'quite a history... Today the profession and its productivity have expanded so greatly that there is plenty of room for another quality journal. So we expect *HA* will expand and strengthen the field.'⁸

Bev Kingston, also a distinguished historian of Australia, rightly noted shortly after Jill's death that she 'never belonged to any clique or faction in the field of history'.⁹ Like Miles Franklin, another feisty feminist rebel from rural Australia, Jill Roe will be long remembered as her own woman.

About the author

David Carment is Emeritus Professor of History at Charles Darwin University. Succeeding Jill Roe, he was President of the Australian Historical Association between 2002 and 2004.

⁸Jill Roe, 'Launching History Australia: The Jill Roe Festschrift, Macquarie University, 11 February 2004', *History Australia* 1, no. 2 (2004): 319–20.

⁹Daniela Torsh, 'Jill Roe, Miles Franklin Biographer, Remembered as "One of Australia's Greatest Historians"', *ABC News*. Accessed 17 January 2017. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-01-17/jill-roe-historian-dies-aged-76/8185528>.