Entry type: Person
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Denman, Lady Gertrude

(1884 - 1954)

Born	18841107, Kensington London England
Died	19540602, London England
Occupation	Businesswoman, Philanthropist

Summary

On the slopes of Capitol Hill, overlooking a vast plain and the wandering Molonglo, Lady Denman pronounced in a clear voice, ‘I name the capital of Australia – Canberra’. It was Wednesday, 12 March 1913. While Lady Denman performed the naming rites her husband, the Governor-General, Lord Denman, laid a commemorative foundation stone. The site for the city was selected in accordance with Section 125 of the Constitution which stipulated that the federal seat of government would be located within the state of New South Wales, but not within a 100-mile radius of Sydney.

While playing her role in the creation of Canberra with aplomb, Lady Denman was destined for a higher realm of public duties, later becoming famous as ‘chairman’ of both the National Federation of Women’s Institutes and the National Birth Control Association in Britain.

Details

Lady Denman was born Gertrude Mary Pearson in 1884 as the only daughter of Sir Weetman Pearson, an engineer, oil industrialist and newspaper baron who was the Liberal Member of Parliament for Colchester between 1895 and 1910; was created a baronet in 1894 and later became 1st Viscount Cowdray. Miss Gertrude Pearson was called Trudie by her family and learnt much from their lead. She became a sound businesswoman in the mould of her father, and a keen philanthropist and political worker in the tradition of her mother (both mother and daughter served on the executive committee of the Women’s Liberal Federation). Her mother, Lady Cowdray, an ardent supporter of the suffragette cause, was as proficient in the world of politics as she was in the ways of a society hostess.

In 1903 Trudie married Thomas, the third Baron Denman. In 1911 Lord Denman was appointed Governor-General of Australia and thus Trudie became first lady. As a young woman with two small children, Lady Denman embarked on a challenging posting in a distant country. It seemed Lady Denman’s acceptance in Australian society was a ‘foregone conclusion’. As the *Sydney Mail* reported, among her well known attributes an enthusiasm for all forms of sport would strongly appeal to the people of the Commonwealth. [1]

Indeed, Lady Denman proved to be exceedingly adept in all spheres of public life during her time in Australia. As observed by *Punch*, the Lord and Lady Denman are ‘helping the social whirl spin always a little faster. They are in everything – not merely placid, critical spectators, but cheerful, enthusiastic gaiety-makers. They enjoy themselves thoroughly, and help everybody else too. It is the proper spirit to have in Vice-regal personages. It helps them, and it helps us.'[2] This boundless enthusiasm was particularly evident at a Melbourne tennis tournament hosted by the Lawn Tennis Association at which Lady Denman and the Private Secretary, Mr. Vernon, played in the mixed doubles handicap:

Lady Denman has gained a whole army of friends by her action in coming down into the arena in this way. She was undoubtedly nervous on Saturday, when a huge crowd gathered around the court on which she was playing, but everybody in that crowd had a real honest feeling of good-fellowship for the lady who was so much of a sport that she had climbed down from the high horse of Vice-royalty and entered fully and whole-heartedly into the games and amusements of ordinary people like ourselves. It makes a whole heap of difference, you know. There is a much warmer feeling of regard for a Vice-regal lady who, hot and perspiring, is to be seen skipping and hounding about a tennis court than for a stately person who merely bows to folk out of a State carriage.[3]

Lady Denman’s name was commemorated in the launching of a ferry boat, the *Lady Denman* at Jervis Bay on 5 December

1911. The ferry was built on the shores of Currambene Creek, Huskisson, by Joseph Dent for the Balmain Ferry Co, and remained in service on Sydney Harbour until 1979. Now housed and preserved at the Lady Denman Heritage Complex, the *Lady Denman* holds memories for many Australians.

Lady Denman's relentless public displays however were very much a dutiful chore and, while she conducted herself with diligent decorum, it was not one to which she was temperamentally suited or relished. She found officialdom monotonous and the pedestal on which she was placed by a well meaning public alienating, leading to an exhausting and lonely life. Her relationship with Lord Denman was also strained as the marriage had failed to develop into one of intimate companionship.[4] Homesickness, private strain and the burden of public duties combined to adversely affect Lady Denman's health, and in May 1913 she returned to Britain to rest and recuperate. Lord Denman remained as Governor-General until 18 May 1914.

Lady Denman's departure was felt keenly. She had identified herself with many movements, of which her involvement in the National Council of Women was central. In a letter to the Editor a member of the National Council of Women described the 'real feeling' demonstrated at a farewell party held in her honour: 'There is no doubt that Lady Denman's vivid personality, sound business head and untiring energy have combined with her broad sympathies to make her the last woman Australia would willingly part with and it was with quite undisguised regret that the members of the National Council finally said goodbye to her.'[5]

On her return to Britain Lady Denman became a Director of Westminster Press Limited, and was invited to become the Chairwoman of the Women's Institute Subcommittee which had recently been established by the Agricultural Organisations Society. When the National Federation of Women's Institutes was formed in 1917, Lady Denman became the first National Chairwoman. Believing strongly in the right and ability of women to conduct their own affairs, Lady Denman was a remarkable leader, setting an exhausting example:

1930-1954: Chairman, Family Planning Association
1932-1938: President of Ladies' Golf Union
1932-1953: Chairman, Cowdray Club for Nurses and Professional Women
1934-1939: Member of Executive Committee of Land Settlement Association
1938-1954: Life Trustee, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Lady Denman was invited by the Minister of Agriculture to become the Honorary Director of the Women's Land Army, and for this she earned the Grand Cross of the British Empire in 1951. Lady Denman died in 1954.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Archival resources

Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
DENMAN, Lady Gertrude Mary (1884-1954)

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