The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2102

Garran, Lady Hilda

(1872 - 1936)

Born	18721211, Durham Sunderland United Kingdom
Died	19361231, Canberra Australia
Occupation	Community Leader

Summary

Lady Hilda Garran, wife of Sir Robert Randolph Garran, was an agent of social cohesion in Canberra’s earliest days.

Details

While Sir Robert Randolph Garran was a major force for Federation, collaborator on the Constitution and our very first federal public servant his wife, Lady Garran, was an agent of social inclusion during the teething years of Canberra's establishment.

'How far that little candle throws its beams.' Whenever I read that line it instantly recalls to mind the personality of one woman, who, in a short space of years, exercised a profound influence upon the people of a whole city, and that city the capital of Australia – Canberra.[1]

Hilda Robson, who became Lady Garran, was the daughter of John Shield Robson, a shipbuilder from Monkwearmouth, Durham and Caroline (nee Iliff). Most of the family emigrated from Britain to Australia after the business became unprofitable as a result of the increasing popularity of steel ships. John Shield Robson was a kinsman of William Shield, Master of the King's Musick at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and writer of such memorable tunes, according to the *Oxford Companion to Music*, as 'The Thorn' and 'The Wolf'.

Ernest Iliff Robson, first Headmaster of the North Sydney Church of England Grammar School was Hilda's older brother, and adept in both the classics and rowing, while elder sister Gertrude was a precursory model of adventurous spirit. Giving up the social and cultural swirl of Sydney, Gertrude took up teaching in missionary schools at Thursday Island and in Papua New Guinea. In 1917, stricken with fever, she was dead within two days, but was mourned and remembered as a woman of immense courtesy, respect and courage. [2]

On 7 April 1902 Hilda Robson, also a schoolteacher, married Robert Randolph Garran. In the late 1890s Garran was instrumental in the drafting and amending of the Federation bill and the Australian Constitution. As Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department from 1901 he was the founding member of the Commonwealth Public Service. While many departmental heads and constitutional lawyers come and go without leaving a strong legacy Garran, through his roles in national, British Commonwealth or international affairs left an indelible mark on the nation, its institutions, its political evolution and its laws. [3]

While Garran garnered widespread admiration through this host of endeavours, it was his partnership with his wife Lady Garran and, together, their cast-iron commitment to the betterment of Canberra, which won many a heart's affection. When the initial contingent of public servants reluctantly made the move from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927, a chorus of moaning rose from the conscripted recruits. Many found leaving family, friends and the lifestyle of metropolitan Melbourne for their new career, and a daily life of mucking in and making do in a formative backwater, decidedly unpalatable. Sir Robert and Lady Garran refused to bow to this dirge of woe and dismay, and instead dropped anchor and rallied to mesh Canberra into a cohesive community.

Employing quiet persistence and gracious humility, Lady Garran became a crusader for the cause of kindness, friendliness and culture. She made it her business to extend a personal welcome to every new resident with whom she could establish contact. Arranging events, organising amenities and famously 'stalking' newcomers on buses and later pursuing them with gift baskets of fresh produce, Lady Garran almost single-handedly 'spread the love'. Rivalled only by her husband, Lady Garran instilled through her unfailing efforts a true sense of neighbourliness, and helped to unite a potentially stratified society.

Lady Garran could lay claim to helping bring about loving memories of growing up in Canberra, as conveyed by Dawn Waterhouse:

Canberra was a party place with house warmings and welcomings, with card evenings or sing-songs around the pianola. Every one dressed in their best… Societies flourished, hikers took to the hills, the Aero club to the sky, the alpine club to the snow. The Repertory to the stage the artists to their trestles, the philatelists to their magnifying glasses. We all went for a dip at the Manuka pool or the Cotter. If we did not know everyone we knew them by sight and nodded and smiled.[4]

As a mother to four sons, Richard, John, Andrew and Isham Peter, and as a wife in active partnership with her husband, Lady Garran's death in 1936 was a great loss to her family, but also to the city to which she had made such a commitment and nurtured for ten years.

This entry was prepared by Roslyn Russell, 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

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