

Entry type: Person
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Byles, Marie Beuzeville

(1900 - 1979)

Born	8 April, 1900, Ashton-On-Mersey Cheshire United Kingdom
Died	21 November, 1979, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Author, Conservationist, Feminist, Journalist, Lawyer, Mountaineer, Pacifist, Photographer, Political activist, Print journalist

Summary

Marie Byles was the first woman to qualify to practise law in New South Wales. As Honorary Solicitor, she worked with Jessie Street to change the law regarding women’s guardianship of their children. Establishing her own legal practice allowed her to devote herself to bushwalking, mountaineering and conservation of the environment. She was responsible for reserving Bouddi Natural Park north of the Hawkesbury River. A Pacifist, Byles was a devotee of Gandhi and developed an interest in Buddhism. A founding member of the Buddhist Society of New South Wales, she became an international authority on Buddhism and wrote several books on the subject.

Details

Marie Byles was born in 1900, the year of Queen Victoria’s death, to Ida Unwin Byles (a cousin of publisher Sir Stanley Unwin) and Cyril Beuzeville Byles, an expert in railway signalling. Cyril was offered a position with New South Wales Railways and the family moved to Sydney in 1911. Marie was educated at Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) Croydon, then Pymble. She was Head Prefect and Dux.

Byles studied Arts, then Law, at the University of Sydney. In 1918 an Enabling Act was passed in NSW, allowing women to practise law. Marie won the Rose Scott Prize for International Law and attracted media attention on her graduation. She worked with many women’s organizations including Jessie Street’s United Association of Women to help change the laws regarding women’s rights in marriage and divorce, and, in particular, the guardianship of their own children.

A bushwalker, Byles was drawn to mountaineering and travelled the world by cargo boat in 1929 to gain experience in high altitude climbing in Scotland, Norway and Canada. She climbed Mt Cook in New Zealand and returned to that country twice more to climb virgin peaks and map unexplored areas, before leading an international expedition to south China in 1938.

On returning to Sydney from her round-the-world voyage, Byles established her own legal practice, knowing that she would struggle to be given the respect she deserved by a patriarchal legal profession that saw women as secretaries and clerks. She employed an all-female staff, training them as highly skilled paralegals, and was committed to profit-sharing. The proficiency and loyalty of her staff allowed Byles to spend extended periods of time on overseas expeditions.

An early member of the Sydney Bushwalkers Club, Byles joined with others who were committed to conserving the natural environment and saving it from development. As Honorary Solicitor for the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs, she helped to get large amounts of land reserved in State Parks. In particular she wanted to reserve a stretch of coastline north of the Hawkesbury River that she had explored as a young woman. She achieved this in 1935 and became a Trustee of Bouddi Natural Park. She was notorious for organising regular working bees that saw up to a hundred people making tracks and installing water tanks etc.

Byles served as President of the Federation of Bushwalking Clubs for some years as well as editing its journal. With Paddy Pallin, the camping equipment provider, she founded The Bush Club, a specialised bushwalking club for people not interested in doing exhausting overnight bushwalks. The club attracted many European refugees who were glad for the opportunity to become acquainted with their new country but needed to report to the police every night.

On a bushwalking expedition to Bouddi in 1941, Byles suffered a collapsed arch and this restricted her bushwalking involvement. The failure of her attempt to reach the summit of a virgin peak in south China in 1938 shattered her and eventually inspired her

interest in philosophy and Eastern spirituality. She travelled to India in 1953 and wrote about the life of the Buddha in *Footsteps of Gautama Buddha*. A devotee of Gandhi, she named the cottage that she had built next to Pennant Hills Reserve 'Ahimsa' after Gandhi's principle of non-violence. She wrote a book, *The Lotus and the Spinning Wheel*, on the comparisons between Buddha and Gandhi.

Byles learned of a form of meditation taught by Buddha, 'Vipassana', and travelled to Burma to do an intensive retreat at the Maha Bodhi centre in Mandalay. She wrote a book about her experiences, *Journey Into Burmese Silence*, that helped guide a new generation towards the spirituality of the East. Byles was a founding member of the Buddhist Society of NSW, the first society of Western Buddhists in Australia. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, she opened her home to Quakers and Buddhists for silent meditation and discussion groups.

Byles travelled to Japan to investigate Zen meditation and discovered the Ittoen spiritual community. She published a book on their teacher's philosophy, and wrote her own book, *Paths to Inner Calm*. In 1966 she was attacked while sleeping on the verandah of her home in Cheltenham. She was hospitalised and convalesced at the home of her friend, the writer Florence James, in the Blue Mountains. Suffering constant headaches, she learnt about the Alexander Technique and studied under the only teacher in Sydney. When he died Byles wrote a book on the exercises called *Stand Straight Without Strain*.

In 1974 Byles was honoured by the Women Lawyers Association for 50 years in the practice of law. Mary Gaudron and Elizabeth Evatt (recently Justices of the High Court) attended.

Suffering from cancer, and refusing hospitalisation or painkillers, Marie Byles died at home on 21 November 1979. She bequeathed her home and the nature reserve on which it stands to the National Trust of NSW.

This entry was researched and written by Anne McLeod.

Excerpted from the Dictionary of Sydney, relating to Byles' pioneering role in the law:

In her efforts to become an articled clerk (part of requirements for legal qualification at the time), she had some discouraging encounters with law firms – one male solicitor viewed Marie's potential as a mere typist. Eventually she was articled to Stuart Thom & Co on 6 June 1924. To obtain the requisite training with the master solicitor, her father had to pay £200 for her articles. The usual cost for male graduates was, in contrast, £100. Marie's father also had to provide her with suitable clothing for work. Unfortunately, the articles proved to be a soul – destroying experience. A change of workplace was made possible with the intervention of Sir John Peden, the Law Dean of Sydney University. Henry Davis & Co agreed to employ Marie in a role as managing clerk.

She was also active in the United Associations of Women and the National Council of Women of New South Wales.

By the 1930s, the practice employed five other women and sought to obtain the services of female barristers when they were available, including Sibyl Morrison. The legal practice dealt with matters of probate, conveyancing and debt recovery.

In 1952 Marie became the first female master solicitor when articled clerk Margaret Crawley joined her practice. By this time, the work premises were inappropriate and Marie created a private company to purchase land at 2A Hillview Avenue, Eastwood. Here she built the Berangie Chambers, an Aboriginal word meaning 'friend'. Marie designed the building to ensure the space was airy and filled with light. The practice moved here in 1953. In the late 1950s, she continued to consciously employ married women and promoted their professional development. Marie even offered to sponsor her law clerks to study for the Solicitors' Admission Board exams.

In 1970, she sold her business to Helen Larcombe, who had been the first female solicitor to practise in Newcastle in 1957.

In 1974, Marie celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of becoming a solicitor, and shared the occasion with two eminent judges, Judge Elizabeth Evatt and Judge Mary Gaudron.

Events

1920 - 1960

Published resources

Resource Section

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<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130368b.htm>

Site Exhibition

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<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Thesis

A History of Women in the Legal Profession in New South Wales, O'Brien, Joan M., 1986,
<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/History-of-Women-in-Legal-Profession.pdf>

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