

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5652

McCay, Beatrix

(1901 - 1972)

Born 8 January, 1901, Castlemaine Victoria Australia

Died 14 June, 1972, Canterbury Victoria Australia

Occupation Barrister, Lawyer, Volunteer

Summary

Beatrix (Bix) McCay was the second woman to sign the Victorian Bar Roll when she did so in 1925. Unfortunately, her career at the Bar was cut short by a diagnosis of tuberculosis and the requisite sojourn in a sanatorium and subsequent convalescence. She nevertheless went on to contribute to public life through her involvement in numerous community organisations, including the Red Cross and the Girl Guides.

Go to 'Details' below to read a tribute to Beatrix McCay written by her daughter in 2009, for which permission to reproduce has been granted for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project.

Details

The following additional information was provided by Sophie Quinlivan (Beatrix McCay's daughter) and is reproduced with permission in its entirety.

Beatrix (Bix) McCay was born on 8 January, 1901 in Castlemaine. Her only sibling, Mardie was 4 years older. Both spoke of a childhood in which one of the highlights was being read to by their father, both stories and verses he wrote for them and the "Thinking" games they would play. This 'pre-school' education in language, literature, classics and mathematics was delivered by no mean teacher – their father, James McCay was, in 1885, co-owner and co principal of Castlemaine Grammar School, was M.A., LL.M., wrote for The Argus and from 1901 to 1906 was a member of the Federal Parliament, Above all, James McCay was passionate about the rights of women to obtain as good an education as their male counterparts, and he did all he could to ensure that his daughters received that good education.

Bix's early formal education was at Castlemaine with a brief interlude at the Ballarat convent. Her mother died suddenly in July, 1915, the same month that her father was wounded in Gallipoli so her latter secondary years from 1916 were spent as a boarder at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Burke Road, East Malvern.

In 1918, Bix commenced her studies at Melbourne University, initially for a Bachelor of Arts, but in 1919 began a combined Arts/Law course. She was in residence at Janet Clarke Hall from 1918 to 1920. She enjoyed university life, participating in many extra curricular activities including theatre, sport, particularly hockey and regular volunteer service at Yooralla Kindergarten for disabled children

She bought a motorbike and became a familiar figure in breeches, leggings and leather coat around the University and, after graduation, around Melbourne town itself. To quote Smith's Weekly's Sidelights on 09.01.32:

.... It was the said Bix who in her Janet Clarke Hall days used to startle the natives by careering around on a motorbike clad in breeches and leggings.

In 1923, Bix graduated LLB (with honours) and in 1925 graduated LLM being, at that time, only the third woman to have done so. She did her articles with Moules Solicitors.

In 1925, she was admitted to the 'Bar', the second woman to be admitted to the Bar, in Victoria. Bix read with Bob Menzies. She was the only woman at Selbourne Chambers at that time and it was with great joy and pleasure that she spoke of those two to three years. She had a great admiration for Menzies and I believe he respected her ability. She greatly enjoyed discussing points of

law with other lawyers, was very quick mentally, was accurate in her analysis of material, had a good sense of humour and was a good speaker. I particularly admired her impromptu speaking.

Unfortunately, her career at the Bar was cut short by a diagnosis of tuberculosis and the requisite sojourn in a sanatorium and subsequent convalescence.

In August 1930, she married George Reid, my father, the marriage having been delayed considerably because of her lengthy convalescence.

Bix had always been very close to her father and the early completion of my parents' home-to-be enabled her to personally care for her father in his final illness until his death in October 1930. She and George actually planned the house with a view to her father's comfort, having a specially long bath to accommodate his wounded, unbending leg.

From mid 1933, being a mother as well as a good wife claimed most of Bix's time. Happy memories of my early childhood included wonderful bed-time stories, poetry and thinking games (styled on her own experience, I expect). When I was older, weekend meals could be very long because of great discussions. Guests were fascinated by their length and by the number of reference books which ended up on the table!

During the 1939 – 1945 war, there was some discussion as to whether Bix should return to the law, but she felt she'd been out of it for too long and her child was still quite young. She therefore volunteered for the Red Cross Transport Services, for which women drove their own car on Red Cross duties. She did this from 1941 to 1947. My mother was a good and experienced driver – prior to her marriage the motorbike had been superseded by a car which, at this time, was a 1937 Oldsmobile. Red Cross Transport did do C.B.D. "waste collection" using a large truck on which Volunteers did training sessions. Manipulating this through the narrow lanes of the Melbourne CBD and manipulating the bales of waste from back door to truck was a challenge my mother accepted with alacrity and really enjoyed.

My mother was associated with the Girl Guide movement from 1925, until the late 1960s. Initially she was a guider and later became a member of the State Council, and State Executive. She was convener of the Property Sub-committee. Also she drafted the first constitution for Victoria and was very much involved with the work relating to their Act of Parliament. On her retirement from guiding she was given the Emu Award.

She was a Special Magistrate of the Children's Court at Box Hill from 1937, probably up to the late 1960s. She used to sit on alternate Monday afternoons. She was an active member of the Children's Court Magistrates Association and was vice-president for at least one term.

In 1952, she also became an Official "Visitor" under the Children's Welfare Act.

In 1953, she was awarded a Coronation Medal.

She was a great believer in *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano* and played golf once a week at the Croydon club where she was president of the Associates for a year or so. She was also a member of the Box Hill Archery Club.

My mother was a great support to my father when he was a member of the Legislative Assembly. He won the seat of Box Hill in 1947, but lost it in the next election. He then regained it and held it till his retirement in 1973. People found it easy to pour out their troubles to my mother – she was a great listener and could often suggest a solution herself, and if she could see that their local Member's help was what was required, she would assist them with preparing submissions to him. She was very interested in my father's parliamentary activities and would often spend time in 'the visitors' gallery, especially when my father was speaking.

Fate may have denied my mother a stellar career at the Victorian Bar, but I think she was very satisfied with the life she had. She was absorbed in her many voluntary activities in which her special talents and legal training were invaluable. Also she had a wonderful marriage, was best friends with her only child, had a loving family and an army of friends in all walks of life.

Published resources

Resource

Women Barristers in Victoria: Then and Now, The Victorian Bar, 2007,
<https://www.vicbar.com.au/wba/>

Site Exhibition

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

Author Details

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Digital resources



Title: Beatrix McCay
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TO PRACTISE AS A BARRISTER—Miss B. McCay (Master of Laws) and Sir James W. McCay, K.C.M.G. (her father). Miss McCay was admitted at the Supreme Court, Melbourne, on the motion of her father.

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