

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5731

Watson, Irene

Occupation Academic, Activist, Barrister, Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

A proud Tanganekald and Meintangk woman from the Coorong region and the south east of South Australia, Irene Watson was the first Aboriginal person to graduate from the University of Adelaide with a law degree, in 1985. She was also the first Aboriginal PhD graduate (2000) at the university, winning the Bonython Law Prize for best thesis. Her research motivation has been clear from the outset: to gain a better understanding of the Australian legal system that is underpinned by the unlawful foundation of *Terra Nullius*.

Watson's work has made a significant impression on everyday legal practice in respect of centring an Indigenous perspective in the long processes of law reform. In 2015 she published *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* the first work to assess the legality and impact of colonisation from the viewpoint of Aboriginal law, rather than from that of the dominant Western legal tradition.

Watson has been involved in the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement in South Australia since its inception in 1973, working as a member, solicitor and director. She has taught in all three South Australian universities and was a research fellow with the University of Sydney Law School. She is currently a research Professor of Law at the University of South Australia and she continues to work as an advocate for First Nations Peoples in international law.

Watson was involved with the drafting of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples between 1990 and 1994 and has more recently, in 2009 and 2012, made interventions before the UN Human Rights Council Expert Advisory Committee of the current position of Indigenous peoples.

In 2016, Watson was appointed The University of South Australia's inaugural Indigenous pro-Vice Chancellor.

Irene Watson was interviewed by Nikki Henningham for the Trailblazing Women and the Law Oral History Project. For details of the interview see the National Library of Australia [CATALOGUE RECORD](#).

Details

A longer essay detailing Irene Watson's career is in development.

Published resources

Resource

Irene Watson: SA's first Aboriginal lawyer welcomes young graduates, Thorpe, Nakari, 2016,
<http://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/05/11/irene-watson-sas-first-aboriginal-lawyer-welcomes-young-graduates>

Site Exhibition

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

Book

Aboriginal peoples, colonialism and international law : raw law, Watson, Irene, 2015

Looking at you looking at me : an Aboriginal history of the South-east, Watson, Irene, 2002

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

Irene Watson interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Trailblazing women and the law oral history project

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

Created 30 May 2016

Last modified 21 November 2018

Digital resources



Title: Professor Irene Watson

Type: Image

Date: 3 May, 2023