Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6072

Laby, Jean Elizabeth

(1915 - 2008)

Born	19151104
Died	20080531
Occupation	Physicist

Summary

Jean Laby was the first woman to be awarded a PhD in Physics from the University of Melbourne. She combined a lectureship in the Department of Physics with a senior lectureship in the RAAF Academy at Point Cook, Victoria. Jean was the only woman on staff at the Academy.

Jean was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2009.

Details

Jean Elizabeth Laby not only spent all of a long and distinguished working life at the University of Melbourne; she spent much of her childhood there as well. Her career was one of firsts. From 1927 to 1943 her father, the Professor of Physics Thomas Laby (1880-1946), occupied the house at the Grattan Street end of Professors' Walk known as 'Towcett', which was later occupied by Professor Amies.[1] Apart from her school years at Melbourne Church of England Girls' Grammar School her education was at Melbourne University. She took her BSc in 1939 and MSc, with a thesis on her investigations for the war-time Optical Munitions Panel on the thermal conductivity of water, in 1951.[2] Her PhD thesis, produced as part of her work with Victor Hopper on atmospheric winds and cosmic rays at balloon altitudes, was awarded in 1959.[3] She was the first woman to be awarded a PhD in Physics from the University of Melbourne.

In an interview recorded for the Australian Academy of Science, Jean Laby noted that living in the grounds was as convenient for herself and her sister as undergraduates as it was for her father as Professor and recalled night-time visits to his Department and the embarrassment of attending his lectures. The outbreak of war meant that instead of taking a position in the Bureau of Meteorology, she took one as part-time Demonstrator in the Department of Natural Philosophy.[4]

Jean Laby combined a lectureship in the Department of Physics with a senior lectureship in the RAAF Academy at Point Cook, Victoria, the functions of which were later assumed by the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. Her colleague Victor Hopper was the inaugural professor of physics and dean of university studies at the Academy and Jean Laby was the only woman on the staff. Her research included radar meteorology and balloon-borne cameras as well as cosmic radiation measurements. In collaboration with the University of Wyoming, as part of the Climatic Impact Assessment Program from 1972 to 1980, she measured atmospheric aerosols, ozone and water vapour in the stratosphere. The work involved sending balloons up to 30 kilometres above the Earth.

Jean Laby was inducted to the Victorian Honour Roll of Women in 2009.

[1] Physics was originally known as Natural Philosophy.

[2] Jean E. Laby. *The Thermal Conductivity of Water and Some Measurements with Other Liquids*. Thesis (MSc). University of Melbourne, Department of Science, 1951.

[3] Jean E. Laby. *Atmospheric Winds and Cosmic Rays at Balloon Altitudes*. Thesis (PhD). University of Melbourne, Office of Research, 1959.

[4] Jean Laby interviewed by Nessy Allen in 2000 as part of the Australian Academy of Science *Interviews with Australian Scientists*.
https://www.science.org.au/learning/general-audience/history/interviews-australian-scientists/dr-jean-laby-1915-2008-physicist

Events

2009 - 2009
Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

1961 - 1980
University of Melbourne

Published resources

Book
40 Years 40 Women: Biographies of University of Melbourne Women, Published to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the International Year of Women, Flesch, Juliet, 2015,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/4040/

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives
Jean Laby Papers

Author Details
Juliet Flesch

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