The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE6098

Fincher, Ruth

(1951 -)

Born	19510327, Boort Victoria Australia
Occupation	Feminist, Geographer, Professor

Summary

Ruth Fincher is a distinguished geographer who has worked in Canada, the United States of America and Australia. As a feminist, she was a member of the Committee for Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne from 1986. In 2002 she was elected Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia and created Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2014.

Details

Ruth Fincher was born on 27 March 1951 in Boort, Victoria, the older of two sisters. Named Beatrice Ruth she has always been known by her second name. Her parents, Beatrice Margaret and Roy Fincher, whose families were located in rural Victoria, were secondary school teachers, who held Bachelor of Arts degrees from the University of Melbourne. During Ruth's childhood the family moved around Victoria as her father took up ever more senior positions in state secondary schools, while her mother found teaching positions in the same locations; her mother later became a senior lecturer in Librarianship at Melbourne State College. Ruth attended primary schools in Terang, Coleraine, Moonee Ponds and Mildura, and then the secondary schools, Mildura High School and University High School. In 1969 she started a BA degree at the University of Melbourne, majoring in Geography and History and graduating in 1972 with a BA Honours degree in Geography. During the last two of her undergraduate years at the University of Melbourne she lived at Janet Clarke Hall, then a residential college for women.

In her honours year in 1972 a member of the academic staff in the Geography Department encouraged Ruth to apply to undertake postgraduate study in North America, supported as was possible by a teaching assistant to tutor while pursuing a postgraduate degree. After a year working in the Commonwealth Public Service in Canberra, for which she had been selected into the Administrative Trainee Scheme run by the Commonwealth's Public Service Board, she moved in 1974 to McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where she undertook an MA in Geography. During her Arts degree at Melbourne, much of the geography Ruth had studied was physical geography. But once in Canada, she shifted her focus within the discipline of geography to human geography, the social scientific side of this broad field that looks at relationships between people and their environments, and began her research in urban and social geography and its connections to urban planning which she has been studying ever since.

In mid 1975, after completing her MA, she commenced a PhD in Geography at Boston University, Boston Massachusetts, that she completed at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her PhD dissertation examined the role of local institutions in shaping urban renewal in Boston. The network of critical geographers, especially feminist geographers, in which she was embedded in those days of PhD study at Clark University, remained with her for the rest of her career and their perspectives influenced her research and teaching practice. Her first academic job (a tenure-track position), was in the Department of Geography at McGill University in Montreal as an Assistant Professor, where she worked for two years. This was followed by a four year period in which she worked as an Assistant Professor (tenured) in the Department of Geography at McMaster University.

Ruth moved back to Melbourne in late 1985, where her husband the economic geographer Michael Webber, took up the position of Professor and Chair of the Department of Geography at the University of Melbourne. Starting as a Research Fellow in Urban Planning at Melbourne in 1986, Ruth Fincher became a Lecturer and later Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography. In the 1980s she gave birth to three children: Kate (1983, died 1984), Sophie (1985) and Tom (1988). Ruth worked at the University of Melbourne for 30 years from 1986 to 2015, apart from a brief period in the 1990s when she was seconded to the Commonwealth Government's Bureau of Immigration Research. She took up a variety of roles that her research and teaching interests equipped her for in both the Geography Department and the Urban Planning program of the Architecture, Building and Planning Faculty. In her last 13 years at the University, she held numerous leadership roles, including Dean of the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning, President of the University's Academic Board and Pro Vice Chancellor, Chair of the Council of Janet Clarke Hall, and Head of the School of Geography. Her scholarship about the development of social difference and locational disadvantage in the city, and her explorations into the ways that urban policy might be more just, continued throughout this time.

Support for the discipline of geography has been an important focus of Ruth's career. Following early work to assist in the establishment of specialty groups on gender and geography within the Canadian Association of Geographers and the Institute of Australian Geographers, she undertook numerous leadership roles. She has served as President of the Institute of Australian Geographers; Chair of the Gender and Geography Commission of the International Geographical Union; Vice President of the International Geographical Union; and as a board member for international geography on the International Social Science Council. In 2002 she was elected Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and created Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2014.

Author Details
Rosemary Francis

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