Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0063

McClemans, Sheila Mary

(1909 - 1988)

Born	19090503, Claremont Western Australia Australia
Died	19880610, Dalkeith Western Australia Australia
Occupation	Director, Lawyer, Servicewoman

Summary

Sheila Mary McClemans pioneered entry into the legal profession for Western Australian women. Throughout her life, in addition to her legal career, Sheila held a range of high-level positions, including director of the Women’s Royal Naval Service, and became the role model for many Australian women inside and outside the armed forces. During her lifetime Sheila’s efforts never received the full recognition they deserved within the legal profession. She was denied the traditional rewards of QC, Judge or Dame. The Commonwealth, however, recognised the value of her service to the law and women’s affairs, appointing her an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1951 and a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in 1977. She was also awarded the Silver Jubilee Medal (SJM) in 1977.

Details

I suppose that at the end of the day, it was, for lawyers, her professionalism which was her most outstanding attribute and it was that uncompromising and uncompromised professionalism which was the true source of her capacity to lead and to influence. She served the law and through the law she served ordinary men and women with an unswerving devotion … I am sure that at the end of her life she still saw herself as a debtor to her profession. And we are indebted to her.'

Sir Francis Burt, *Brief*, vol. 15, 5, July 1988.

Sheila Mary McClemans once threw a bucket of water over a naked couple she found making out in a convertible parked outside her house. 'That is what we do to dogs around here' she admonished, or so the story goes. Throughout her life, Sheila Mary McClemans lived by her own set of values. She was not someone who followed the rules ascribed for women, but neither did she dedicate herself to fighting the 'feminist' fight. Sheila defended women's rights if it helped her realise her own goals but she never considered herself a 'feminist'. Even so, early on in Sheila's career, male contemporaries who deplored her 'unfeminine chain-smoking and feminist ways' were quick to saddle her with the sobriquet 'Hard-as-nails McClemans'.

Sheila McClemans was the third of five daughters born to Ada Lucy Walker, the first wife of William Joseph McClemans. She was born in Claremont, Western Australia on 3 May 1909. Sheila's childhood was not an easy one. Abandoned by their alcoholic father, Sheila and her sisters were raised by their mother who was forced to work a variety of jobs and to take in boarders to make ends meet. Sheila learnt compassion for others at an early age as well as how to rely on her own resources to achieve her goals.

After a series of financial and bureaucratic struggles to gain entry and complete her studies, Sheila was one of the first graduates of the law school at the University of WA in 1930 – all four graduates of the class of 1930 were female: Margaret Battye, Mary Kathleen Hartney, Mary Connor Kingston and Sheila. In 1933 Sheila was admitted to the Bar. The following year, unable to find work in a law firm, Sheila and her friend Molly Kingston formed a partnership and set up the first all woman law firm in Western Australia. After a short period as a practising solicitor, however, Sheila decided to redirect her energies to assisting the war effort. She joined the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) where her excellent leadership and administrative skills were soon recognised and rewarded. After her time in WRANS, Sheila returned once again to the legal profession, and in the 1950s and 1960s ran a solo practice, often working for nothing to help those in need if the circumstances warranted it.

Sheila pioneered entry into legal practice for Western Australian women and filled a range of high level positions, including, director of WRANS, national president of the Australian Federation of University Women, secretary of the Western Australia Law Society, foundation member of the Western Australia Legal Aid Commission; the State Parole Board, and the WA committee administering the Commonwealth Canteens Trust Fund. And yet, the legal world denied Sheila the traditional rewards of QC, Judge or Dame. As Supreme Court Judge, Antoinette Kennedy decreed, 'It was a lifetime of commitment that went largely unrewarded'. Biographer, Lloyd Davies, similarly notes: 'Sheila's aberration was to be born a female at a time and in a place when that entailed many disadvantages both by convention and law – particularly within the legal profession itself'. Sheila's tireless work was, however, eventually recognised by the Commonwealth. For her service to the law and to women's affairs, Sheila was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1951 and a Companion of the Order of St Michael & St George (CMG) in 1977. She was also awarded the Silver Jubilee Medal (SJM) in 1977.

Sheila married Frank Morrison Kenworthy (1899-1976) in 1949. She was to outlive her husband and all of her sisters. Lilly, her youngest sister, died in 1977. The following decade the remaining four McClemans sisters all died in a period spanning less than two years. Sheila died in Dalkeith, Western Australia, on 10 June 1988.

Published resources

Newspaper Article
Case of the conservative Sheila and the Lefty, 2002

London Gazette, 1951

Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, 1951

Resource Section
Kenworthy, Sheila Mary (RAN/Mrs), Australian War Memorial,
http://www.awm.gov.au/database/h_award.asp

MCCLEMANS, SHEILA MARY, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002,
http://www.ww2roll.gov.au/script/veteran.asp?ServiceID=N&VeteranID=1193223

Book
Sheila: A biography of Sheila Mary McClemans, Davies, Lloyd, 2000

Reflections : profiles of 150 women who helped make Western Australia's history; Project of the Womens Committee for the 150th Anniversary Celebrations of Western Australia, Popham, Daphne; Stokes, K.A.; Lewis, Julie, 1979

W.R.A.N.S. : the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service, Curtis-Otter, M, 1975

Ships belles : the story of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service in war and peace 1941-1985, Fenton Huie, Shirley, 2000

Women on the warpath : feminist of the first wave, Davidson, Dianne, 1997

Book Section
Foreword, Rayner, Moira, 2000

Review
Review of Review of Lloyd Davies, (2000) Sheila: A biography of Sheila Mary McClemans, Godfrey, Kelly, 2001

The Life of a Distaff Legal Pioneer, Dixon, Marion, 2002,
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UWALawRw/2002/6.pdf

Journal Article
Vale - Our Wartime Chief, 1988

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html

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

Archival resources

Australian War Memorial, Research Centre
Members of the first WRANS Officer Training Corps.

State Library of Western Australia
Miss Sheila McClemans [picture]

Author Details
Judith Ion

Created 24 June 2002
Last modified 28 September 2026