Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0119

Cleland, Rachel

(1906 - 2002)

Born	19060119, Perth Western Australia Australia
Died	20020418
Occupation	Community worker

Summary

Born in Perth in 1906, Dame Rachel Cleland lived an active life which was centred around politics and community organisations. At one time considered the matriarch of the liberal party, in her later years Dame Rachel was very vocal on her opposition to the logging of old-growth forests. She insisted that the Liberal party under Menzies would never have taken the same stance as the current party on such issues. Dame Rachel’s community work with women and children was recognised in 1959 when she was appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) and again in 1966 when she was appointed as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). In 1980 Dame Rachel became the only western woman to be appointed as a Dame of the British Empire (DBE) by the government of Papua New Guinea for the volunteer work she did for many Papua New Guinea organizations and for helping involve women in public affairs.

Details

I enjoy now whatever is happening – my idea is you can't enjoy tomorrow, and you can only enjoy yesterday if you are enjoying today.'

At 90, Dame Rachel Cleland was still keeping audiences entertained with her words of wisdom born of a life of political activism and community work.

Born in Perth beside the Swan River, the oldest of six children, Rachel Cleland remembers her childhood as being happy and free-ranging. She, like her brothers and sisters, was encouraged to take an interest in social issues from an early age and was given a range of regular chores to do that encouraged them to be independent and resourceful.

Dame Rachel's background and her later training and work as a kindergarten teacher stood her in good stead for the expatriate life she eventually embarked on in Papua New Guinea. Her husband, Sir Donald Cleland, was Administrator of Papua New Guinea for 15 years from 1951. Like many expatriate wives in the 1950s, Dame Rachel identified with her husband's work, which in turn provided her with the opportunity to get to know and help the local people. She was well liked and respected by the local people who appreciated her contribution to organisations like the Red Cross, Girl Guides, Country Women's Association, and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) as well as the integral role she played in establishing pre-schools throughout Papua New Guinea. Not surprisingly perhaps, recent research also indicates that Dame Rachel was more involved than was earlier thought in Papua New Guinea affairs via her husband's work.

After Sir Donald's retirement the Clelands decided to remain living in Port Moresby, never seriously considering moving back to Australia. Sir Donald died in 1975, two weeks before Papua New Guinea's independence ceremonies. Dame Rachel stayed for a further three years before eventually returning to her extended family in Australia, where she felt herself to be something of a displaced person. She had, by then, lived in Papua New Guinea for 27 years. She continued to make trips back to her expatriate home country for the rest of her life, making a total of eight visits between 1979 and 2000.

Dame Rachel was appointed as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1959 and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1966 for her work with women and children. In 1980 Rachel Cleland became the only western woman to be appointed as a Dame of the British Empire (DBE) by the government of Papua New Guinea for services to the country she had lived in for so much of her adult life. She was honoured for the volunteer work she did for many Papua New Guinea organisations and for helping involve women in public affairs.

Dame Rachel died peacefully in Goondiwindi, Queensland, aged 96, on 18 April 2002, after a heart attack. She had only a week earlier moved there from Perth to be near her son Evan and his family.

Published resources

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Dame Rachel, 78, still calls Papua New Guinea home, 1984

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Liberals lose matriarch, 2002

Making a difference [Dame Rachel Cleland], 2002

Poverty requires "community help", 1996

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Book
Grass roots to independence and beyond: the contribution by women in Papua New Guinea 1951-1991, Cleland, Rachel, 1996

Papua New Guinea: pathways to independence: official and family life 1951-1975, Cleland, Rachel, c1983

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Who's Who in Australia 2002, Herd, Margaret, 2002

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Archival resources

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Papers of Nancy Lutton, 1918-2007 (bulk 1960-2007) [manuscript]

Papers of Dame Rachel Cleland, 19-- [manuscript]

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Dame Rachel Cleland, Community worker and wife of Sir Donald Cleland, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Rachel Cleland interviewed by Nancy Lutton [sound recording]

State Library of Western Australia
Community Kindergartens Association records

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