The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0024

Dowse, Sara

(1938 -)

Born	19381112, Chicago Illinois USA
Occupation	Feminist, Public servant, Women's rights activist, Writer

Summary

Sara Dowse is a prize-winning writer of reviews and Canberra-themed fiction. A feminist and women’s rights activist, she was a member of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Women’s Electoral Lobby-ACT. She became the inaugural head of the Women’s Affairs Section of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (now Office of the Status of Women) for the Whitlam government.

(*This entry is sponsored by generous donation from Christine Foley.*)

Details

Born in Chicago, USA, Sara Dowse (nee Rosenthal) grew up in Hollywood, the daughter of an actor mother and celebrity lawyer father. Born of Jewish parents, she experienced anti-semitism in her early years, and left for Australia at nineteen (in 1958) when she married a visiting Australian footballer.

She studied Arts at Sydney University, and after experiencing sexism as a pregnant student and in society generally, she became what has been described as an ‘old-style feminist’.

She arrived in Canberra in 1968 and worked as a journalist, publisher’s field editor and tutor at the Canberra College of Advanced Education. She was a member of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Women’s Electoral Lobby-ACT, and became the inaugural head of the Women’s Affairs Section of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (now the Office of the Status of Women) for the Whitlam government. At the time of her appointment, she was dubbed ‘Supergirl’ by the press.

Dowse became spokesperson for 130 organisations that opposed the removal of lawfully performed abortions from the medical benefits scheme.

After a publicised resignation from the public service, she worked as a teacher at The Australian National University, a reviewer for newspapers and journals, and became a writer of novels and short stories. She has also been an interviewer for the National Library of Australia’s Oral History Program. She was forty-five when her first novel, *West Block*, based on her experiences in the Prime Minister’s department, was published in 1983.

Dowse’s other books include *Silver City* (1984), *Schemetime* (1990), *Sapphires* (1994) – a largely autobiographical work about rediscovering Jewish roots – and *Digging* (1996). She has contributed to *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia* (1982); *Leaving School, It’s Harder for Girls* (1983); *Women, Social Welfare and the State* (1983), *Sisterhood is Global* (1984) and *Home Grown Anthology* (1993).

She was a member of Seven Writers – a group of seven Canberra-based writers whose work vividly portrayed life ‘beneath the surface of Canberra’ – and as part of this collective she contributed to *Canberra Tales* (1988), republished as *The Division of Love* in 1996, an anthology of short stories about life in Canberra. The work received an ACT Bicentennial Award.

Dowse has also been awarded the AIPS/APSA Women in Politics Prize (1982); 3M/Royal Blind Society Talking Book of the Year (1994); ACT Book of the Year (1995); ACT Book Reviewer of the Year (1995 and joint winner in 1997 with Marion Halligan). She was short-listed for the Steele Rudd Award (1995) and long-listed for the IMPAC Dublin Prize (1996). She has also been the recipient of an Australia Council fellowship; a Harold White Fellowship (1991) and an ACT Literary Fellowship (1996).

Sara Dowse has five children.

Published resources

Book
Getting Equal: the History of Australian Feminism, Lake, Marilyn, 1999

Australian women writers : a bibliographic guide, Adelaide, Debra, 1988

The Division of Love: Stories, Barbalet, Margaret et al, 1995

Digging, Dowse, Sara, 1996

Sapphires, Dowse, Sara, 1994

Schemetime, Dowse, Sara, 1990

Silver City, Dowse, Sara, 1984

West Block: the hidden world of Canberra's mandarins, Dowse, Sara, 1983

As the lonely fly, Dowse, Sara, 2017

Conference Paper
Femocrats and Ecorats: Women's Policy Machinery in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, Sawer, Marian, 1996, http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpPublications)/D1A254C22F3E5CC580256B67005B6B56?OpenDocumen

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Elizabeth Ward interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Elizabeth Reid interviewed by Sara Dowse

Susan Ryan interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Julia Ryan interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Interview with Lyndall Ryan, Professor of Australian Studies, University of Newcastle [sound recording] / interviewer, Sara Dowse

Interview with Gae Margaret Pincus, lawyer [sound recording] / interviewer, Sara Dowse

Interview with Helen Garner, author [sound recording] / interviewer, Sara Dowse

Kathleen Taperell interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Meredith Edwards interviewed by Sara Dowse in the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia collection [sound recording]

Amirah Inglis interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Cassandra Pybus interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Carmel Bird interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

Linda Jaivin interviewed by Sara Dowse

Anne Summers interviewed by Sara Dowse [sound recording]

National Library of Australia
[Biographical cuttings on Sara Dowse, public servant, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Records of the Seven Writers group, between 1986 and approximately 2000

Papers of Brenda Walker, 1989-1996 [manuscript]

Papers of Drusilla Modjeska, 1959-2006 [manuscript]

Papers of Dorothy Green, 1943-1990 [manuscript]

Correspondence, 1972-96; Amirah Inglis, Geoff Page, Amy Witting, Marion Eldridge, Sara Dowse, Les Murray, Philip Hodgins, 1988-94. Includes congratulations on Banjo Award for To the burning bush.

Papers of Marion Halligan, circa 1970-circa 2003 [manuscript]

Papers of Elizabeth Reid 1963-1981 [manuscript]

Records of Curtis Brown (Australia) Pty Ltd., 1962-2002 [manuscript]

Papers of Ann Turner, 1901-2009 (bulk 1975-2004) [manuscript]

Papers of Sara Dowse, 1958-2007 [manuscript]

ACT Heritage Library
HMSS 0131 Word Festival Canberra Records

HMSS 0154 Majura Women's Group Records

Author Details
Barbara Lemon

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