

OBITUARY

Dorothy Ross, AM, OBE. Farmer, Public Member, APC. 1928-1998

In her lifetime, Dorothy Ross, who died in Holbrook District Hospital on Tuesday at the age of 70, acquired an impressive list of honours. She deserved them all, yet was a humble person from a farming background. She never married, once remarking ruefully that she would gladly have forgone her awards for a family life. In truth she had no need for regret; she touched many lives, and all for the better.

Dorothy Dickson Ross was born in Sydney to a pioneering family whose roots in Holbrook, NSW, went back to the mid-1800s. Among her forebears was Sir James Dickson, Defence Minister in the first Australian government (he died on January 10, 1901, having been in office for just a week).

She was educated at PLC and Frensham, Mittagong, spending 14 years in educational institutions, including a period at the Bedford Physical Training College in England. She later said of her original choice of career: "I didn't really enjoy teaching, yet it gave me the training to be able to put thoughts and words together."

In 1957, she retired from teaching, and took the opportunity to buy some land from her father. She lived the rest of her life on the land her great-grandfather had taken up in the mid-19th century. She named her property Tintagel after King Arthur's birthplace - she had a passionate love of English history.

For a single, 29-year old woman to start a farm was a daunting task, and Dorothy's successful development of her 200 hectares was one of her proudest achievements.

She increasingly became involved in civic affairs. By nature a leader, she quickly rose through the ranks of the Country Women's Association, becoming its State president between 1971-1974; she would later write its history.

During this period, she started writing a column for *The Land* newspaper on behalf of the CWA. Between 1985-1988, she was national president of the CWA and, according to a senior writer for *The Land*, was "regarded like royalty by CWA members ... slightly intimidating perhaps, but much loved and terribly well respected."

Her reputation and standing, among country people especially, remained high well after her retirement from the CWA presidency. One friend and colleague recalls a 1993 meeting at Wudinna, on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula: "People drove for hundreds of kilometres from all over the peninsula to hear Dorothy speak. It was an admiring audience, captivated by the echoes they heard in her words of the most generous values in Australian community life."

Between the '70s and the '90s, Dorothy was also a member of the Holbrook Shire Council, chairman of the Winifred

West Schools Council, consultant to the Law Reform Commission, member of the national Rural Advisory Council and a member of the Riverina CAE Council.

Dorothy had politics in the blood. There was, of course, Sir James Dickson, one of the fathers of Federation, on her mother's side but her father was the State MP for Albury when she was born.

She stood for the Country Party in the 1975 Senate election and was defeated by 850 votes. She noted that she was "on the bottom of the ticket where women were invariably placed in those days". She tried again two years later for the National Party in the half-Senate election. This was the year, as she put it, that the "Democrats struck oil"; she did not.

Another of her long-term interests was her membership of the Australian Press Council. She was a founding public member, and its vice-chairman from 1977 to 1985) and from 1987 to her retirement from the council in 1997.

She was a clear thinker and was never overawed by anyone - including the various Press Council chairmen, distinguished men as they all have been. She invariably spoke her mind, sometimes to the discomfiture of her listeners; she certainly had grave doubts about many aspects of media behaviour and was never backward in speaking bluntly of them.

That said, she was also skilled in handling the most combative complainants and respondents, more often than not leading them inexorably towards the resolution of what might have seemed to be an irreconcilable dispute.

Her contribution over two decades comprised an invaluable asset to the Press Council. She more than pulled her weight during her 21 years of service and her council colleagues had regular cause to appreciate her sharp intellect, kind personality and warm smile. She was, quite simply, an inspiration, often a mentor, to many council members - particularly its public members.

She was awarded an honorary doctorate by Charles Sturt University in 1994 but, as with her AM and OBE and all the other honours one reads about in the reference works, they didn't touch upon the real person.

The real Dorothy Ross demanded equal rights for women and was an unashamed newspaper junkie. She was also an enthusiastic bowler and would sit up all night watching a cricket Test. She was a bushwalker and a daughter who didn't think it odd that she thought daily of her mother. She was a friend, a sister, an aunt and an educator. She was a lady, cruelly felled by cancer before her time. She is survived by three sisters, Janet, Marion and Alison, and a brother, Nigel.

DEBORAH KIRKMAN