
Vale Mary Cecilia Ridsdale

7/10/24 – 16/8/07

The Alice Springs legal profession mourned the loss of long-serving lawyer, Mary Ridsdale, in August

It is not often in our profession, especially in the Territory, that we can count one of our number, one whose career spanned 50 years. Mary Ridsdale was such a one.

Mary Clancy was born in Lismore, Victoria on 7 October 1924. Clearly a woman ahead of her times, she studied law subjects at Melbourne University from 1942 until 1946, at the same time serving her articles with J.P. Hennessy in Carlton.

At age 22 she was admitted to practice in Melbourne on 1 April 1947, and was the only woman to have won a Victorian Supreme Court Judges Prize.

She worked for Gordon Rennick in Collins Street until 1948. From 1950 to 1952 she opened her own practice in Blackburn, a most adventurous move for a woman at that time.

Marriage to Gregory William Ridsdale on 11 October 1948 and the onset of children in 1952 saw "time out" for family commitments.

However, following the death of her beloved Greg and the successful raising of 6 children she resumed legal practice in 1972 with Warren Graham & Murphy in Bairnsdale Victoria.

In what must have appeared to be a most radical adventure, but probably no surprise to her family, Mary was admitted to practise as a barrister and solicitor in Papua New Guinea on 1 July 1975. For four years she managed the Public Sectors Office in Rabaul and travelled all over New Guinea on the Supreme Court Circuit. With her



Mary Ridsdale with her parents, Mr and Mrs Clancy, on Mary's admission day 1 April 1947

was her youngest child, Maryrose.

However, motivated by the increasing political and social upheaval in New Guinea, she moved back to Melbourne in 1981 to work for the firm Coltmans, and then from October 1983 until September 1985, she was employed by the Law Institute of Victoria in the Department of Professional Conduct and Practice.

It was at this time that she was approached by Shane Stone, a Melbourne barrister who had been in the process of establishing the Katherine Aboriginal Legal Aid Service. Mary was admitted in the Territory on 7 October 1985, and commenced work immediately with KRAALAS. In this capacity she appeared regularly in the Magistrates Court in Katherine and the Supreme Court in Darwin. Through her dedication and industry, the service provided

competent and comprehensive legal representation to Aboriginal people living in Katherine and the surrounding communities.

I recall visiting Mary in Katherine in February 1986, whilst doing a locum for Loftus & Cameron. Mary had just moved in to her new unit, in a new housing development. As her house guest I was assigned the task of cleaning and mopping. No amount of elbow grease or copious buckets of water could shift the fine red dust that covered her white tiles. Meanwhile, Mary sorted her belongings. Her golf clubs, carted wherever she went, took pride of place. I remember vividly Mary walking over my unsuccessful efforts at mopping, with immaculate painted toenails and the inevitable cigarette dangling from her fingers.

Another approach by Mr Stone enticed Mary to Alice Springs in



NEW BARRISTERS.—After taking the oath at the Law Courts yesterday, these four people were admitted as barristers and solicitors by the State Full Court. (Left to right): Mr. K. Cranage, Miss M. Clancy, Mr. A. Douglas and Mr. J. Lurye.

The newspaper clippings reproduced in this article are from Mrs Ridsdale's family, and are believed to be from *The Age* (or its predecessor) on 2 April 1947.



THREE of four law graduates who were admitted to the Bar today. Mr J. Lurye (left) and Mr K. G. Cranage watch Miss Cecilia Clancy sign the roll in the Prothonotary's office.

1989, where she became a senior solicitor with the firm Buckley & Stone (later Morgan Buckley). By this time, Mr Stone had moved to Darwin and shortly thereafter entered politics, becoming the Territory's Attorney-General and subsequently Chief Minister. However, this was not to be the end of their association.

In 1997, Mary retired from active legal practice and was appointed by the Stone Government as a member of the Liquor Commission, now the Racing, Gaming and Licensing Commission. She remained in this role until her final retirement in 2002. Mary was then 78 years young.

Mary stayed in Alice Springs, considering it "central" to her children, now scattered around Australia and overseas. As a dedicated Catholic, she remained active in church matters and maintained her many contacts with her friends, many of whom were Aboriginal people living in communities.

Of course, there was always time for golf.

Over her long and varied career, Mary had practised in the areas of criminal law, family law, civil and commercial litigation, professional standards and ethics, administration and liquor licensing. No mean feat in this era of specialisation.

We should all be pleased and gratified that someone of Mary's experience, professionalism and personal calibre, has contributed to the legal profession in the Territory. In her quiet understated way, she was something of an adventurer, in a field that was slow to welcome the involvement of women. She was committed to helping others, with a no-nonsense compassion, yet all the while forged a trail that many of her younger colleagues would be reticent to travel.

Mary Cecilia Clancy Ridsdale passed away in Adelaide, after a short illness, and was buried in Bairnsdale, Victoria, following

Legal History Made By Woman

The only woman ever to have won a Victorian Supreme Court Judges' prize, Miss Mary Cecilia Clancy, 22, was admitted as a barrister and solicitor by the State Full Court today. The award was for her examination results on the law on property.

Miss Clancy also had won the Harry Emmerton Scholarship for articulated clerks, the subject being "Introduction to Legal Method and Legal History."

Three Supreme Court Judges' prizes are awarded each year and they are worth a total of £200. Although known as judges' prizes, the scholarships are paid out of the Supreme Court Library Fund, to which every barrister and solicitor admitted must subscribe 40 guineas.

Miss Clancy, who is a daughter of Mr and Mrs J. Clancy, was educated at Santa Maria, Northcote. Mr Arthur Adams moved her admission.

a Requiem Mass at St Marys Catholic Church. She was 82. She is survived by her six children, 10 grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

Farewell, Mary.

Josephine Stone AM

28 August 2007