

Dame Roma Mitchell

AC, DBE, CVO, QC

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This *Balance* Issue is themed on Women in the Law. When I was told of the theme, I went to the fount of all knowledge ... GOOGLE... and typed in "Australian Women in the Law" ... and here is what I found. I have to admit I knew nothing about Dame Roma Mitchell, so the information was an eye opener. She was an interesting person and excelled in her chosen profession, it leaves one very humble considering the feats of one such as Roma Mitchell.

Dame Roma Flinders Mitchell AC, DBE, CVO, QC (2 October 1913 – 5 March 2000) was an Australian lawyer, judge and state governor. She was the first Australian woman to be a judge, a Queen's Counsel, a Chancellor of an Australian University and the Governor of an Australian State.

Roma Mitchell was the second daughter of Harold and Maude Mitchell. She graduated from St Aloysius Convent College, Adelaide and she was made a Justice of the Supreme Court of South Australia in 1965, a position she held for 18 years.

When Roma Mitchell was four, her father was killed in WWI and her mother struggled to bring up her daughters. Even at that early age, young Roma had made up her mind about what she wanted to do.

"For as long as I remember, I wanted to be a lawyer and I don't quite know why."

"What Roma did know was that she had a strong sense

of social justice."

"I was always willing at school to push for things that I thought were right and push against anything that I thought was an injustice. I also had the characteristic of being the spokesperson for the class."

During her years at university, Australia was in the Great Depression. Roma Mitchell felt unemployment and poverty were wrong and that something had to be done.

"I think my interest in people was one of the things that fired me to study law because I had the feeling that people could be helped that way... I always felt that justice demanded that we shouldn't have a depression again and I think that strongly influenced me in practice as well as elsewhere."

Roma Mitchell was admitted to the Bar and for 28 years worked as a Barrister representing people in Courts. It was a tough job with long hours and she worked hard to overcome the much entrenched attitude that the law was for men only. She was appointed Australia's first woman Queen's Counsel in 1962. She fully supported the efforts by the league of Women Voters to allow women to sit on juries.

Three years later in 1965, she became Australia's first woman



The statue commemorating the achievements of Dame Roma Mitchell.

Supreme Court Judge. She had worked very hard to achieve these appointments and said on the occasion that she had hoped that in her lifetime, appointments such as hers would not excite comments as they did at that time. When she retired from the bench in 1983, there was still no woman appointed during these years or



Dame Roma Mitchell at North Terrace in Adelaide

one to replace her.

In 1981, Roma Mitchell became the first founding chairman of the Australian Human Rights until 1986 when it became the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. By that time, Roma Mitchell had become a campaigner of international

acclaim. She thought the passing, and implementation, of the Human Rights Commission Act, a landmark. She considered this the most important committee that she had served on.

Throughout her career, Roma Mitchell was a pioneer, a crusader for equality, and a conservative feminist, always pleased to lead women into new directions. She has been inspirational to women for rising to the top, entirely on her own merits, in a male dominated profession. Affirmative action and anti-discrimination laws, in particular those dealing with Aboriginal people, have been a trademark of her distinguished career.

She was Governor of South Australia from 1991 to 1996, the first female Governor in Australia. Roma Mitchell also served as Chancellor of the University of Adelaide from 1983 to 1990 and was a member of the Council for the Order of Australia from 1981 to 1990.

With her special interest in women's issues, Roma Mitchell became the Patron of the Centenary of Women's Suffrage in 1994. Roma Mitchell has always held strong views on feminist issues. When appointed to the Supreme Court Bench, she said, *women should be able to take whatever place they are fitted to take in the professions*. She often spoke about the issue of working wives, refresher courses for women graduates who wanted to return to work after having brought up their children and the need for housework to be shared.

Roma Mitchell was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) on 12 June 1971, she was raised to Dame Commander (DBE) on 12 June 1982. On January 1981, Dame Roma was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC), Australia's highest civilian honour, for services to the law, to learning and to the community. She was made a Commander of the

Royal Victorian Order (CVO) on 1 January 2000.

Dame Roma Mitchell died on 5 March 2000 and was accorded a state funeral in recognition of her term as Governor and her life as an outstanding leader. There is a statue commemorating the achievements of Dame Roma Mitchell at North Terrace in Adelaide, SA. It is undeniable that Dame Roma Mitchell has left a lasting impression of a women's ability to more than succeed in her chosen legal profession. There remain ongoing reminders of Dame Roma Mitchell's hard work and legacy, and ongoing celebrations of her achievements.

- The Dame Roma Mitchell Grants, established by the Government of South Australia to give financial assistance to young people who are, or have been under guardianship of the Minister in South Australia;
- Mitchell Chambers situated at 27 Sufien Street, Adelaide, South Australia, is named for and was opened by the late Dame Roma Mitchell on 8 November 1991;
- Establishment of the Roma Mitchell Human Rights Volunteer Service that facilitates the world of e-volunteering. E-volunteering ("e-vols") is dedicated to the pro-active advance of human rights, with the long term goal of securing these rights through constitutional change. They engage with refugees and Indigenous human right issues, and the peace movement. The Roma Mitchell Community Legal Centre operates a free and confidential legal service to the public. The service is operated by legal practitioners who generously donate their services to the public. ●