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A New Kind of Womanhood

Gillian Dooley talks to Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round, authors of *Roma the First: A Biography of Dame Roma Mitchell* (Wakefield Press).

‘Roma the First’ – clearly you’ve had the title in mind for some time. To what extent was she personally a groundbreaker, as opposed to the first in an inevitable series of changes?

We had the title from the beginning, 2002. After all, she was the first woman in Australia to be made a Queen's Counsel, a judge on a superior court, the first woman invited to present the Boyer lectures, the first woman elected chancellor of an Australian university, the first woman appointed governor of an Australian state. Being 'the first woman' presented us with many of the questions we wanted to answer, about her courage and her capacity to stand alone. Being 'the first woman' also showed us to her pioneering a new, modern, kind of womanhood. Roma Mitchell herself regarded her appointment as a QC as her major achievement, a recognition of her abilities. After that, again she said it herself, it was often a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

The law was a very masculine profession when Roma Mitchell entered it. Do you think she was a lawyer first and a woman second? Did she sacrifice femininity for the law, or did she invest the law with more of a female point of view?

She never sacrificed femininity; her style of self-presentation was always either feminine, or, as in court, gender-neutral. Former Chief Justice Len King considered that her judgments showed 'not the slightest trace of bias in favour of women'. He also noted, though, that she favoured licences for bottle-shops over licences for pubs which were an exclusively masculine domain at the time. She opposed the right of a defendant in a rape case to give an unsworn statement – meaning that he was not subjected to cross-examination, while the rape victim was routinely cross-examined quite fiercely.

You have also asked whether ‘Government House looks any different now that it has been Dame Roma’s house’. What did you conclude? How does her term as Governor compare with that of later female incumbents?

We haven't done the research to allow us to say anything about other female state governors. Our point about whether Government House looks any different now that it has been Dame Roma's house was, once again, about her pioneering the role of a female governor. Clearly Government House didn't fall down because the Governor was a woman (indeed, given the serious repairs underway throughout her term, it might have fallen down had she *not* been Governor). She was probably stricter about protocol than her successors here, or interstate, but that was because she wanted to be taken quite as seriously as her predecessors – all men.

Another small point – Roma’s middle name was Flinders, as was her father’s. Do we know why?

No, we don't. We were more interested in finding out what people were like; for example, Roma's mother Maude had a sister who was probably a barmaid. And Kerrie found out a lot of information about Roma's father Harold which she was unable to include.

Throughout the book there are passages in italics, where you reflect and speculate on the unknowable. I think that works very well as a marker for that grey area where the biographer goes beyond established fact, because a biography that refuses to do so is very dull indeed, while one that indulges too much seems presumptuous. I also thought you dealt very well with the rumours of her affair in the early 1970s. How do you decide where to draw the line?

You pose questions, but you don't make things up. The story about her 1970s affair was told to us as fact but no-one would go on the record. We didn't want to leave out such an important part of her life, but we didn't want to upset people either, so we cast it as a story with a fictional name. Roma was very private about her personal life. There is, however, no evidence that she was a lesbian, despite many rumours. Much of this speculation is the kind of thing that happens to women who don't marry. Even Sir William Deane succumbed to the need to say something on the subject in his eulogy at her funeral Mass.

During an interview in her early years on the Supreme Court, the following exchange occurred with a somewhat brash journalist. 'You are not married?' 'I am not'. 'And you do not drive a car?' 'I do not'. Undeterred by the terseness of the replies, the journalist pressed on: 'The Chief Justice, Dr. Bray, is also unmarried. Is there any chance that the two of you might get together?' 'No', Roma replied, 'that would be no good at all. He doesn't drive a car either.'

You tell a couple of stories which some might regard as immoral – I note that the *Advertiser* picked up solely on this minor aspect in their article on the book in December – but there is very little real 'dirt', isn't there? And very few stories about really bad behaviour – meanness or unkindness.

We don't think there was *any* meanness or unkindness. She had a quick temper, but we believe she was really a wonderful person. The book has an epigraph, a quotation from Roma: 'I suppose generosity of spirit is more important really than anything else.'