

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE4779

Bilney, Elizabeth

(1943 - 2010)

Born 12 August, 1943, Yorketown South Australia Australia

Died 26 September, 2010, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia

Occupation Feminist, Librarian

Summary

Elizabeth Bilney was a founding member of the Women's Electoral Lobby in the Australian Capital Territory during the mid-1970s and took a lead in the campaign for working mothers' access to childcare. She made a significant contribution to the acceptance of the right of children to good care and the responsibility of government to support this in Australia.

Elizabeth also edited and managed the publication of *The Heritage of Australia* (1981) for Macmillan of Australia in association with the Australian Heritage Commission; she established the journal *Heritage Australia* for the Australian Council of National Trusts, and was publishing co-ordinator for the National Gallery of Australia, and publications manager for the National Library of Australia.

Details

Elizabeth Joan Gunton was born in Yorketown, South Australia on 12 August 1943, the second of three daughters to schoolteachers James Donald Gunton and Jessie Helen McLellan. The family lived in Stansbury at the time of the birth and James Gunton's job as a rural school inspector prompted moves to Streaky Bay in 1945, Port Lincoln in 1948, Kadina in 1951 and Adelaide in 1953. The young Elizabeth Gunton and her sisters attended local primary schools. Her younger sister, Barbara, as a toddler learning speech, metamorphosed Elizabeth's four syllables into 'Bibi', a name used by some close friends and family for the rest of her life.

Elizabeth was selected to attend Adelaide Girls' High School (AGHS) and studied there from 1956-1960. Headmistress, Vera Macghey's, commitment to equal rights for women was a formative influence. From AGHS Elizabeth won a Commonwealth Scholarship to Adelaide University where she commenced a Bachelor of Science in 1961 but left early to take up a cadetship with the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science where she discovered she was allergic to chemicals.

During her time at Adelaide University Elizabeth played a significant part in university revues with her creative design and sewing skills. Gordon Bilney, whom Elizabeth met at Adelaide University and later married, writes, "In the university revues – she was a major contributor in the costume-making part of the productions, which was actually a big deal since original costumes were a big part of the shows. And very good she was too – a skill she carried on into our early marriage years."

From 1963-1965 Elizabeth worked as a reference librarian at the South Australian Public Library during which time she completed a Diploma in Librarianship. She moved to Sydney to take up a position at Sydney University's Fisher Library in 1966 and the following year she married Gordon Bilney in Manila, where he was on a diplomatic posting with the Australian Department of External Affairs.

Elizabeth and Gordon Bilney lived in Manila from 1967 to 1969, during which time Elizabeth worked for the Asian Development Bank. While living back in Canberra, she gave birth to Caroline Jane Bilney in 1970 and Sarah Louise Bilney in 1971. Further diplomatic postings took Elizabeth, Gordon, Caroline and Sarah Bilney to Geneva (1971-1972), Paris (1975-1977) and Kingston, Jamaica (1980-1982).

While in Canberra during the middle years of Gough Whitlam's prime ministership (1973-1974), Elizabeth discovered the childcare difficulties she had experienced overseas were as problematic in Australia. She became a founding member of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and took a lead in the campaign for working mothers' access to childcare. In 1973 Elizabeth and other ACT WEL activists approached Marie Coleman, Social Welfare

Commission Chair, to discuss how best to pursue their ideas about expanding childcare. Later Prime Minister Gough Whitlam requested a policy report from the Social Welfare Commission and this was published in 1974 as *Project Care, Parents Children Community*. Susan Ryan, a senior minister in the Hawke government (1983-1991) wrote to Elizabeth shortly before she died, " we all take satisfaction from the reforms for women and children we were able to embed in the agendas of Labor governments, so firmly that even Liberal coalition governments have never dislodged them. You were a heroine of childcare ... the near universal acceptance of the right of children to good care and the responsibility of government to support this, constitutes a real revolution. Your work was crucial in bringing this revolution about."

Yet this significant work was something Elizabeth's inherent humility prevented her from talking about so that it was only at her funeral when husband Allen Mawer mentioned these achievements in Elizabeth's eulogy that some younger family members and friends became aware of her earlier activism and significant achievements for women and children in Australia.

Back in Canberra in the late 1970s, between the Paris and Jamaica postings, Elizabeth edited and managed the publication of *The Heritage of Australia* (1981) for Macmillan of Australia in association with the Australian Heritage Commission. This became her magnum opus from which she moved on to establishing the journal *Heritage Australia* for the Australian Council of National Trusts, and later became publishing co-ordinator for the National Gallery of Australia, and publications manager for the National Library of Australia.

In 1990 Elizabeth took up freelance editing and for the next fourteen years she worked as a consultant on a wide range of publications including *Decorative arts and design from the Powerhouse Museum* (1991) and the National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW) Social Policy Committee *Health Futures* report.

Elizabeth's marriage to Gordon Bilney ended in 1992. Seven years later – on 31 December 1999 – she married Allen Mawer, author and former senior executive at the Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Elizabeth Bilney and Allen Mawer lived at Wallaroo, New South Wales (NSW) where Elizabeth established a garden in the challenging soil of their home above the Murrumbidgee River. In retirement, from 1998, Elizabeth became involved in the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Canberra, as a member of the Friends' Committee, newsletter editor and volunteer guide. She also engaged with the creativity that had her designing and constructing theatre costumes at Adelaide University in the 1960s and took up jewellery making. She particularly enjoyed setting sea glass from the Walter Hood wreck at Bendalong where she had been part owner with a group of friends in a holiday home since 1979.

Another of Elizabeth's significant achievement that compels acknowledgment is the parenting of her daughters, Caroline and Sarah. In his tribute to Elizabeth at her funeral in Canberra on 1 November 2010, her husband Allen Mawer said "She was immensely proud of Callie and Sarah. With careers as well as partners and children, they had grown into the kind of women she had encouraged them to be; like her, independent, resourceful and self-confident."

Published resources

Elizabeth Bilney died of cancer on 26 September 2010 at Clare Holland House, Canberra's hospice.

Newspaper Article

A champion of equal rights - Elizabeth 'Bibi' Bilney., 2010

Edited Book

Who's Who in Australia, 1988, Cadman, Kerith A, 1988

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>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Author Details

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