

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE4899

Stevenson, Mary

(1896 - 1985)

Born 21 August, 1896, Maybole Ayrshire Scotland

Died 3 July, 1985, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia

Occupation Community worker, Political candidate

Summary

Mary Stevenson was the first woman elected to the ACT Advisory Council and the President and founding member of the ACT Liberal Party Women's Branch. She was a lifelong advocate for women's involvement in politics and community affairs. As well as having a full and impressive political career, she devoted a great deal of time to community organisations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the National Council of Women, the Business and Professional Women's Association and the United Nations' Association. She was awarded an MBE in 1954.

Details

Mary Stevenson was born in Maybole, Scotland in 1896. She attended the North Kelvinside School in Glasgow and after receiving her leaving certificate managed a successful local business.

She married Robert Stevenson in January 1925 and in March of the same year emigrated to Australia. They initially lived in Queanbeyan and in 1926 settled in the suburb now known as Griffith. They lived the rest of their lives in their home called "Braeside". Soon after moving to Braeside, their only son John Stevenson was born.

Stevenson's first venture into political life in Australia was as a member of the Citizens' Rights League, which was established in 1927 to secure Federal parliamentary representation for the ACT. As a member of the CRL, she took part in a delegation to Prime Minister John Curtin to advocate for an ACT seat in Federal Parliament. She was a strong supporter of full federal voting power for the ACT, as well as for democratic local government. On this point she was quoted as saying, "we cannot develop good citizenship or proper pride if we do not have some measure of responsibility."

During the Second World War she served as Commandant of No 750 Voluntary Aid Detachment. In recognition of her work for the VDA she received a citation from Princess Alice, Duchess of Gloucester, the wife of the wartime Governor General, Prince Henry. At the same time, she was an Executive Member of the ACT Division of the Red Cross Society and received a Red Cross Medal.

She also served as a Board Member of the YWCA of Canberra during the war, and as President from 1940 to 1942. The 80th Anniversary Apron for the YWCA of Canberra features a quote from Mary: "...we strive to give women a design for living, a design that will show them how to live fearlessly..."

In 1947 she became the first woman elected to the board of the Canberra Community Hospital, where she served for several terms. At this time she also served on the ACT Tourist Bureau Advisory Board and became the first Girl Guides Divisional Commissioner for the ACT and surrounding districts.

She was a founding member of the Canberra Branch of the Liberal Party, established 27 January 1949.

On 24 June 1949, at the Gloucester Hotel in Civic, she convened the inaugural meeting of the ACT Liberal Party Women's Branch, which was attended by 24 women. She later became the President of the Women's Branch and an executive member of the New South Wales branch of the Liberal Party.

In 1951 she became the first woman elected to the ACT Advisory Council, a forerunner of the ACT Legislative Assembly, representing the Liberal Party. She served on the council until 1959. She also served as President of the ACT Liberal Party Electorate Conference.

In 1953 she received the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal for her ongoing contributions to Canberra's community.

In 1954 she stood as the Liberal Party candidate for the federal seat of the ACT. She campaigned for the need for more public halls, community centres, theatres and art gallery's in Canberra; the involvement of women in the design of Canberra houses; an expanded local bus service; and a highway to the coast. She also believed in worldwide membership to the United Nations and fair, uniform divorce laws.

That same year she was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), in recognition of her outstanding public work for Canberra's community.

On top of those already mentioned, she was committed to a range of community organisations, including the National Council of Women, the Business and Professional Women's Association, the United Nations' Association, the Soroptimists, the Victoria League, the Sub-Normal and Incapacitated Children's Association, the Order of the Eastern Star and the Pan-Pacific's Women's Association.

She died in Canberra on 3 July 1985.

Her granddaughter is Meredith Hunter, politician and previous member of the ACT Legislative Assembly representing the Greens.

Published resources

Journal Article

Mary Stevenson: Canberra's Pioneer Liberal Woman, Kent, Gary, 2006

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>

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia

[Biographical cuttings on Mary Steel Stevenson, community worker and politician, containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals]

Author Details

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