

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE5777

Cameron, Mary

(1917 - 2009)

Born 27 September, 1917, Ballarat Victoria Australia

Died 22 September, 2009, Kew Victoria Australia

Occupation Lawyer, Solicitor

Summary

A leading family lawyer in Melbourne, Mary Cameron was the principal in the firm Stedman Cameron. Mary Cameron's father was strongly against higher education. He considered universities a "hotbed of communism", and she had to argue long and hard before he made the grudging concession that if she were to go to university it must be to study "something useful".

When she entered law school at the University of Melbourne in 1935, she was one of only five females studying with 95 males. On graduation in 1938 she was incensed to learn that the academic responsible for finding employment opportunities was asking the females if they also typed. She organised a protest and the academic backed down.

Mary Cameron, who was born in Ballarat on September 27, 1917, began her career with Rylah and Anderson, one of the most highly regarded law firms in Melbourne.

She quickly learnt that the law was pretty much a boys' club and when many male lawyers were called up for World War II she seized the opportunity for advancement.

She never described herself as a feminist or any sort of equal-opportunity activist, although she lived and worked through times of significant upheaval and advances in the workplace. She never spoke publicly about the prejudice she encountered as a young female lawyer but proved her mettle in the courtroom.

In 1955, she was elected president of the Women Lawyers' Association.

A formidable counsel who could have progressed to the bar, Cameron chose to remain a solicitor because it enabled her to have a longer and more intimate association with her clients.

After eight years at Rylah Anderson and a short stint at another firm, she struck out on her own. In her first year she grossed £25 which – minus work expenses – was just enough to get by.

In 1952 she advertised for the creation of a partnership, signing the advertisement simply "Lochiel". It was answered by Colin Steadman, who was taken aback to discover that Lochiel was a woman. But their partnership prospered and Steadman Cameron became a well-regarded family law firm.

From the start Cameron took on gritty common law cases and her first courtroom victory was for her uncle, who had allegedly walked against a red light. Other relatives came out of the woodwork, all wanting her to fix their grievances – even her father. But when she sent him her advice, her mother, Clara, told her: "He does not agree with your interpretation of the law."

Her father, John Cameron, had taken the family to Kenya when Mary was seven. Nuns at the Loreto Convent in Nairobi taught her to confront life. Many years later that quality enabled her to cope, with no great alarm, with the fire-bombing of her car and house by the enraged former husband of one of her clients.

In Kenya she also learnt Swahili.

In her latter years she could no longer drive and had to rely on taxis. But instead of resenting this, she used it as an opportunity for chats in fractured Swahili with African cab drivers.

Her father's adventures probably inspired her own and, with her sister Clare, she travelled to China, Soviet Russia and elsewhere.

Cameron retired as a partner in Steadman Cameron in 1982 but remained a consultant for nearly two decades.

In 2007 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

Mary Cameron did not marry. Her sister Clare predeceased her.

Published resources

Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

Author Details

TBWL project team

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