

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person  
**Entry ID:** IMP0002

## Mitchell, Roma Flinders

(1913 - 2000)

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**Born** 20 October, 1913, Adelaide South Australia Australia

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**Died** 5 March, 2000

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**Occupation** Governor, Judge, Lawyer, Queen's Counsel

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### Summary

The Honourable Dame Roma Mitchell was appointed Commander of the Royal Victorian Order on 1 January 2000. During her life Dame Roma achieved a number of firsts. She was the first woman Governor of an Australian State (South Australia, 1991-1996), the first woman Chancellor of a university in Australia (University of Adelaide, 1983-1990) and the first Australian woman Queen's Counsel (1962).

### Details

Dame Roma Mitchell's father (Harold Mitchell) was killed in World War I. At the time her mother (Maude, née Wickham) had two children under the age of 10. Like many women of her time she had not been trained in any profession and she struggled to bring up her daughters.

Dame Roma was educated at St Aloysius College, Adelaide. She won the David Murray scholarship which enabled her to study law at the University of Adelaide, receiving her degree in 1934. Dame Roma supported the issues of equal pay for women and for women to sit on juries (legislated in 1966). She was recommended by Don Dunstan (Attorney-General SA) to be appointed a Supreme Court Judge of South Australia in 1965, the first woman to be so appointed. Dame Roma was still the only women judge of the Supreme Court in Australia when she retired after 18 years in the position in 1983, aged 70.

Dame Roma became the first woman Chancellor (1983-1990) in an Australian university when she was appointed to the position at the University of Adelaide. In all Dame Roma was associated with the university for over 60 years; first as a student and then a part-time lecturer in Matrimonial and Family Law for five years during the 1960s. In 1965 she became a member of the University Council. She was Senior Deputy Chancellor for 11 years from 1972. Dame Roma was awarded the degree of Doctor of the University for her distinguished service to the University in 1985. In January 1991 Dame Roma took up her appointment as Governor of South Australia (1991-1996). As well as being a member of the Queen Adelaide Club and Lyceum Club, Dame Roma was a member of the Council for the Order of Australia. Her interests included theatre, music and the visual arts and she was Vice-President of the Australian Decorative and Fine Arts Society (De Vries).

In her chapter on Roma Flinders Mitchell in *Great Australian Women*, author Susanna De Vries wrote: 'In June 1999, [the then] Hon. Governor-General Sir William Deane unveiled a life-size bronze statue of Dame Roma "as a permanent tribute to her lifetime achievement in South Australia". The statue stands in Prince Henry Gardens, in front of Government House on North Terrace.'

## Events

### **2001 - 2001**

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

### **1991 - 1991**

Appointed Companion of the Order of Australia (AC)

### **1971 - 1971**

Appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for her services to Law

### **1991 - 1996**

Governor of South Australia (first woman Governor in Australia)

### **1983 - 1990**

Chancellor of the University of Adelaide

### **1965 - 1983**

First woman to be appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia

### **1962 - 1962**

First Australian woman appointed to the Queen's Counsel

### **1934 - 1934**

Admitted to the Bar

### **1996 - 2000**

Chair of the Ministerial Board on Ageing (South Australia)

### **1991 - 1991**

National President of the Australian Association of the Ryder-Cheshire Foundations

### **1981 - 1990**

Member of the Council for the Order of Australia

### **1981 - 1986**

Chairman of the Commonwealth Human Rights Commission

### **1991 - 1991**

President of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

### **1979 - 1981**

Chairman of the South Australian Parole Board

### **1994 - 1994**

Awarded the Institution of Engineers Medal

### **1982 - 1982**

Created Dames Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) for her service to the community

## Published resources

### Edited Book

Who's Who of Australian Women, Lofthouse, Andrea, 1982

S.A.'s greats: the men and women of the North Terrace plaques, Healey, John, 2001

### Resource

Victorian Women's Roll of Honour: Women Shaping the Nation, 2001,  
<https://herplacemuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2001-Honour-Roll-Booklet.pdf>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

### Book

Dame Roma: glimpses of a glorious life, Magarey, Susan, 2002

State funeral, funeral Mass for the Honourable Dame Roma Mitchell AC DBE CVO, 1912-2000, St Francis Xavier Cathedral, Adelaide, Friday 10 March, 2000, 2000

The matriarchs: twelve Australian women talk about their lives to Susan Mitchell., Mitchell, Susan, 1987

Living in South Australia : a social history, Elizabeth Kwan, 1987

Greater than their knowing: a glimpse of South Australian women 1836-1986, National Council of Women of South Australia, 1986

The Complete Book of Great Australian Women: Thirty-six women who changed the course of Australia, De Vries, Susanna, 2003

### Sound recording

Conversation with Her Honour Justice Roma Mitchell [sound recording] / interviewer, Hazel de Berg., Mitchell, Roma, Dame, 1978

### Report

Women's liberation and the law, Mitchell, Roma, 1971

Mitchell Oration 1989 : "Looking back...looking forward"., Mitchell, Roma, 1989

The web of criminal law, Mitchell, Roma, 1975

The External Affairs power in relation to United Nations Conventions, its effect upon the balance of power between Commonwealth and States, Mitchell, Roma, 1995

### Resource Section

DAME ROMA MITCHELL, 2002,  
<http://www.abc.net.au/btn/australians/rmitchell.htm>

Law, Kerwin, Hollie and Rubenstein, Kim, 2014,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0624b.htm>

### Site Exhibition

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>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

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

### Review

The Life of a Distaff Legal Pioneer, Dixon, Marion, 2002,  
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UWALawRw/2002/6.pdf>

## Archival resources

### **State Library of South Australia**

[Dame Roma Mitchell : SUMMARY RECORD](#)

[Interview with Dame Roma Mitchell \[sound recording\] Interviewer: Yvonne Abbott](#)

[Launch of the second stage of The Honoured Women Oral History Project \[sound recording\]](#)

[Launch of the Barbara Hanrahan Memorial Exhibition \[sound recording\]](#)

### **History of Medicine Library**

[The right to live and the right to die - Dame Roma Mitchell.](#)

### **Author Details**

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