

Mary Ridsdale – half a century in the profession

There can be no doubt that the legal life in Alice Springs boasts a particular breed of independent, hardy, and individualistic practitioners. However, it may not be widely known that amongst this group is a woman who, by dint of her length of service to the profession, deserves the respect of her colleagues not only throughout the state, but also throughout the country.

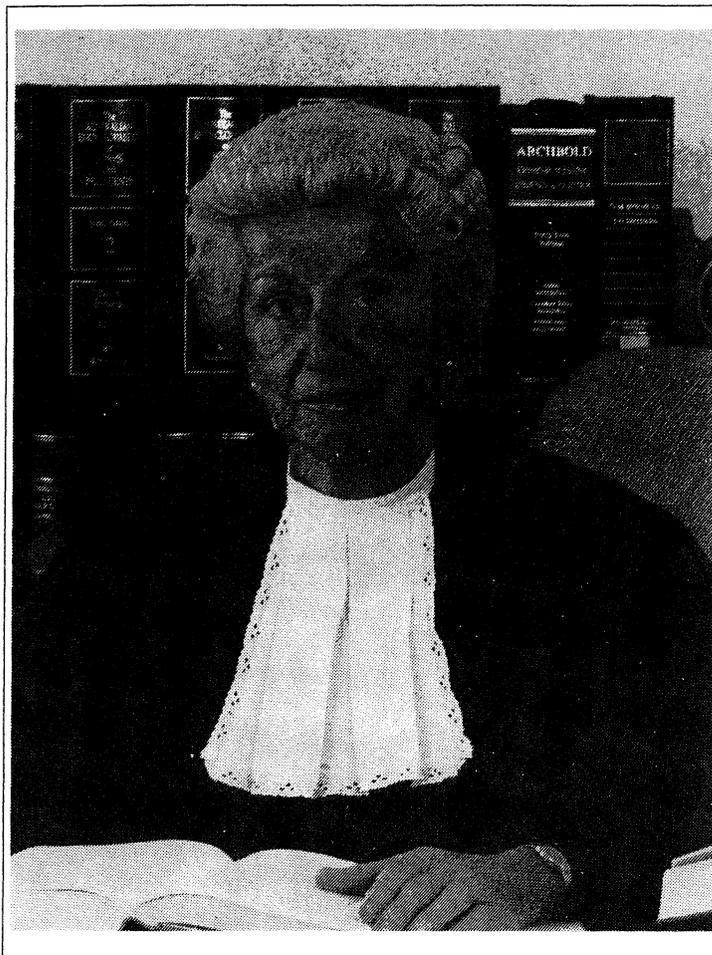
Mary Cecilia Ridsdale was admitted to practice in Victoria in on April 1st 1947 and on that day this year she celebrates fifty years in the profession.

Mary completed Single Subjects Law at Melbourne University in 1946 whilst doing articles with J P Hennessey in Carlton at a time when the life of an articled clerk was by no means an easy one. In those days, articled clerks were expected to work more than a nine hour day and Saturday mornings and were allowed only two weeks annual leave and one week sick leave.

During her first year of articles, Mary received the princely weekly sum of £1 which rose by her fourth year to £3, which she notes wryly was less than the weekly wage of a legal typist.

It is refreshing in the extreme to note that Mary considered the completion of articles to be a high point in her legal career.

The conditions under which Mary gained her qualifications were vastly different from those experienced by law students in today's universities. The yearly fee for each single subject was seven guineas and eleven subjects were studied over five years. Lectures were held out of office hours as a measure towards keeping up the war effort. On



Mary Ridsdale

admission, practitioners were obliged to pay the not inconsiderable sum of forty guineas to the Supreme Court Library.

Mary was a diligent and talented student and was awarded the Harry Emmerton Exhibition for Articled Clerks at the end of her first year. In receiving this highly valued (and lucrative) award in 1942, she was the first articled clerk to do so since 1925. The £100 prize was paid over four years and Mary admits to having no qualms in passing it over to her father whose support during her legal training was constant. This was no isolated academic achievement as Mary subsequently won the Supreme Court Judges' prize in Property during her third or fourth year.

Mary pays great tribute to her parents for their support during her training for a legal career. In particular, she notes

that her father, who, having had no sons, was especially proud of the achievement of his daughter in gaining the ability to practice law in what was essentially a male-dominated profession.

Following the completion of her articles and admission as a barrister and solicitor in Victoria in 1947, Mary took up a position with Gordon Rennick in Collins St, where she remained until her marriage in 1948.

Like many women, Mary regarded her primary role in those days as wife and mother and left full-time work to concentrate on raising her family. However, following her move to Blackburn in Victoria, she put up her shingle and practised law in that area for several years, concentrating mainly on the more suburban areas of conveyancing and wills.

After returning to the law in a full-time capacity in

1972 in a private firm in Bairnsdale, Victoria, Mary found herself appointed to the Department of Justice in Papua New Guinea, firstly in the Crown Solicitor's Office and later in the office of the Public Solicitor in Port Moresby, followed by a period as Deputy Public Solicitor at Rabaul.

It is not surprising to learn that Mary has many tall tales and true to tell of her legal life over a six year period in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s. Among these are experiences of sharing somewhat basic accommodation with the judge and other counsel during trials in the remoter parts of PNG. Her companions in Papua New Guinea included names known to the profession in the Territory such as those of former Master of the Supreme Court, Phillip Lefevre and his Honour, Justice Sir William Kearney.

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Fifty, Not Out

Mary Ridsdale (continued)

Mary recalls an experience shared with his Honour, where they were obliged to carry out a marathon sitting in a remote area to hear a murder case. Whilst the first day was strenuous enough, lasting until 6pm, the second day saw the necessity to sit from 8am until 12.15am. (Mary's client was acquitted.)

Both the judge and Mary were needed in court at 9am the next day in Rabaul, and there seemed little alternative other than to sip a well-deserved nightcap before taking a 5am flight in a small plane back to Rabaul.

One of Mary's achievements whilst in Papua New Guinea was to establish suitable offices for the Public Solicitor at Rabaul which she did by securing funding from any source from which it could be gained, with any questions to be answered after the funding had been converted into bricks and mortar. It was unfortunate to note that this example of desperate measures for desperate times was destroyed during a volcanic eruption in 1992.

Mary's return to Australia in 1981 saw her continue her legal career, firstly with Coltman's in Melbourne and then with the Law Institute of Victoria, largely in the area of professional conduct and practice.

In 1985 Mary moved to the Northern Territory to set up the Katherine Regional Aboriginal Legal Aid Service where she undertook a variety of legal work associated with such a position.

This was followed some years later by a return to private practice at Alice Springs with the firm of Buckley and Stone, now Morgan Buckley.

Fifty years have seen many changes in the law and its practice but Mary Ridsdale has kept up with it all. She admits to "taking things a little easier" these days and is content to work a slightly shorter day than most but has no immediate plans for retirement.

Mary notes that in her eyes, major changes in the law over the period of her involvement tend to relate to the practitioners themselves. She mentions in particular a confidence amongst younger members of the profession that was not present in the more rigidly hierarchical structure of the profession in her earlier days. When pressed, she might admit to



Mary with her parents at her admission

a concern that this could lead to a drop in standards if the watchful supervision and guidance of a principal is not present but one is left with the very firm impression that Mary Ridsdale remains pleased to be part of the legal profession of this country.

Mary's achievements over the period of her life have been remarkable, considering that in addition to maintaining a most interesting and fulfilling legal career, she has managed to raise a family of six children, who are now spread throughout the world, as far afield as Italy and Hong Kong. If the inevitable aging process has so far taken any toll on Mary Ridsdale's capabilities then she must have been a formidable force in her youth.

The Law Society of the Northern Territory takes great pride and pleasure in counting her amongst its numbers and in wishing her every success and happiness in her continuing legal career and after, in a well-deserved retirement in Alice Springs.



Mary Ridsdale with her six children

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