

Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round. *Roma the First: A Biography of Dame Roma Mitchell*. Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield Press, 2007. pp. xi + 465.

Dame Roma Mitchell, LL.B, QC, DBE, AC (1913-2000), was one of Australia's most distinguished daughters. Of middle-class Catholic stock, she was educated at St Aloysius College, Adelaide, by the Sisters of Mercy, and at the University of Adelaide, where she studied law. An outstanding practitioner, she rose up through the Catholic legal fraternity to become the first female Queen's Counsel in South Australia, the first woman justice of the Supreme Court of South Australia, the first female chancellor of the University of Adelaide, and, in 1991, the first female governor of any state in Australia. Nor does that exhaust the many distinctions she earned through her contributions to public life, especially in South Australia, but also nationally in later life, when in 1981 she was appointed first chair of the Human Rights Commission.

This substantial and strongly researched biography goes a long way to explaining her trajectory and ultimate eminence. The biographers have had to face many challenges, not least those inherent in preparing the first biography of this important subject, but also in covering such a long life—Dame Roma's life spanned almost the entire twentieth century—and in coping with the number of people still alive and mostly near to hand who knew Dame Roma (as she insisted on being called). On the one hand, the amount of material increases over time. On the other, so does its sensitivity and provisional nature. The authors have done well to steer a path through the thickets.

They have adopted a straightforward chronological structure. There are twelve chapters, including a reflective epilogue. The chapters proceed steadily through Dame Roma's career. As summarized in the epilogue, the story is one of contradictions: she was a practicing Catholic in what was then a Protestant world, a woman in a male-dominated profession, a committed practitioner of common law who

nonetheless sought to change it, and a reformer who was also a traditionalist, especially as a monarchist. She was also intensely local, and she never married. How then, the biographers ask, did she attain such eminence and authority?

Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round's treatment suggests two main answers: Dame Roma's undeviating professionalism, and the changing culture of South Australia. Some of the toughest chapters to write must have been those on her legal work in South Australia, but these core chapters are vital. The middle chapters, which cover the 1950s to the 1970s, and in particular chapter 6, "The Golden Years," seem to suggest that by the 1960s it may even have been an advantage to be a female and a liberal Catholic lawyer in Adelaide. Not only was there felt to be a need for more women in the law by then, but a lawyer so positioned was helpful in dealing with some of the trickiest issues arising during the Dunstan years of Labor government, when South Australia became a pace-setter in social and moral reform. During those years, several sensitive issues arose, such as allegations of police involvement in the drowning of homosexual law lecturer Dr George Duncan, and widespread innuendos regarding the sexual orientation of Chief Justice John Bray. Roma Mitchell presided over inquiries into these matters with tact and skill.

In 1975, Dame Roma was invited by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (as it was then called) to deliver the annual Boyer Lectures. She took as her subject law reform in South Australia. It seems a pity she did not cast her net more widely. Perhaps she was too busy. In any event, she stuck to her patch, and an opportunity to extend her reputation was probably lost. A future commentator might well seek to assess the significance of this localism in comparative terms. Without diminishing the achievements of "Roma the first," it is notable that the legal profession in South Australia, unlike that in some larger state jurisdictions, was "fused"—that is to say that a formal separation of barristers and solicitors has never been enforced. A competent solicitor could thus advance up the ladder more readily, as Roma Mitchell did as a practitioner of family law. It is also significant that, while a Catholic, her background was not working class.

The success or failure of a biography often depends upon the available evidence. For this biography, there is a great deal of evidence, including oral testimony, although little of it seems to be of the intimate kind; perhaps some evidence of this sort is not yet usable because of privacy considerations. Of particular interest is the religious strand that ran through the subject's life. Dame Roma said little about her faith beyond affirming that it was "a help,"(222) but she attended Mass virtually daily for her entire life. Magarey and Round have taken care to examine the professional implications of this, which seem to be few if any. They also press testimony, some may feel too far, regarding Dame Roma's sexuality; one story suggests that in her late fifties she had an affair with an Adelaide surgeon. As for hints of lesbianism, these now seem implausible. Her friendship with sisters Phyllis Whyte, a librarian, and Billie Whyte, an English teacher, dates from childhood. Dame Roma was a woman of wide cultural interests with many friends, both male and female, in Adelaide and elsewhere; as a regular attendee at world law conferences, she made friends internationally.

It was said at the time of her death that Roma Mitchell was the best-loved state governor Australia had ever known. Readers will have their own preferences among the chapters, but, for this reviewer, chapter ten, "A very good retirement occupation," has been the most enjoyable. Clearly Dame Roma loved her last job, and did it well. Like many lawyers she had a conservative side, and it is evident that she enjoyed the formality of life at Government House and the title of Dame Roma.

Roma the First took the authors six years to research and write. The volume comes complete with numerous graphics, helpful endnotes, and an index. A feature that also invites comment is the authors' method of distinguishing between empirical and speculative matter. They place speculative observations in italics throughout the text.

Readers in Adelaide have already passed their verdict on this biography: a second impression is currently being prepared. At a time when the number of women in the law is increasing exponentially

and interest in researching the lives of women is rising, there is bound to be further interest. For Magarey and Round, “the central and most important dimension in [Dame Roma’s] life was the way in which she enacted a new mode of living for women, a new, modern form of womanhood, and the ways in which she sought to expand the horizons of possibility for other women.”(398) Their work adds another dimension to the title *Roma the First*.

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