

MS SIBYL ELYNE KEITH MITCHELL

Citation for the conferral of a Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*)

Elyne Mitchell was born on 30 December 1913, the daughter of General Sir Harry Chauvel, probably best known as the leader of the charge of the Australian Light Horse on Beersheba in World War I. She was educated at St Catherine's, Melbourne and Radcliffe University, Cambridge, USA. She married Thomas Mitchell on 4 November 1935. He became a prisoner in Changi in World War II, entered the Victorian Parliament in the early 1950s and was a long serving Attorney General until retiring in 1976.

Following their marriage, the Mitchells lived at Towong Station near Corryong, a property held by the Mitchell family since 1899. The Mitchell family were among the first to take up land in the Albury area when Charles Huon de Kerrilleau gave Mungabareena Station (now Albury) to his widowed sister Elizabeth Mitchell in 1835.

Mr and Mrs Mitchell were pioneers of recreational skiing in Australia and Mrs Mitchell was a Victorian and national ski champion and competed overseas. At that time the mountain country on the border of New South Wales and Victoria was inaccessible except on foot or horseback. The Mitchells opened up a number of routes to the ski slopes and Mrs Mitchell is credited with naming several geographical features in the area.

Mrs Mitchell's first book, appropriately enough, is *Australia Alps*, 1942 recounting skiing and bushwalking expeditions made with her husband and others. That same sense of adventure and enthusiasm which marked her progress to skiing championships are quite as apparent here. Indeed, her zestful love of life shines from every page. She is able to encapsulate and condense both physical and mental experiences so that the reader shares their very essence. But while the descriptions are powerful, they demonstrate great sensitivity.

Even her descriptions of life at Towong during the war years in *Speak to the Earth* 1945 have a lyrical quality. There is a charm evident in her chronicling the most mundane of activities; there is charm in her descriptions of the roughest scenes. But at another level, the book is the story of many women who were left to manage a farm while their men were away at the war, having to cope with their own inexperience and isolation with the help only of those "too old to go". We are only now learning the universality of her feeling that the contributions of so many of that era were never fully recognised.

Soil and Civilisation, 1946 is widely regarded as a landmark book. Here, Mrs Mitchell's concern for the land, for conservation of the Alpine and other Australian landscapes, for valuing our natural heritage becomes very obvious. Her prescient views are even more relevant fifty years later. It is imperative that we achieve a unity with the environment, putting back besides taking out.

Love of country infuses all Mrs Mitchell literary work: novels, children's books (the first of the Silver Brumby series was published in 1958) and her recent histories, such as *Light Horse: The Story of Australia's Mounted Troops*, 1978; *Chauvel Country* 1983; and *Discoverers of the Snowy Mountains*, 1985. Few are her peers in

capturing the isolation, timelessness and mystery of the country - her country. She helps us see the high peaks and rocky chasms but, at the same time, makes us appreciate their compelling beauty, and share her love for those who live and work there.

Little wonder then that she has been sought out for the novelisation of the films *The Man From Snowy River*, 1982 and *The Light Horse Men*, 1987.

By no means her last work, *Towong Hill: 50 Years on an Upper Murray Cattle Station*, 1989, is both a review of her life to date and a celebration of life in the area that provides so much of her inspiration.

Elyne Mitchell's children's books in particular are constantly in print and have been translated into eight different languages. The first British printing of *The Silver Brumby* sold out in a week. Today the author receives a constant stream of letters from young readers in every country in which the books are read. The book originally written for her children has touched children everywhere. Her work was recognised in 1990 when she was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to children's literature. Now the film *The Silver Brumby* is about to be released and has already been sold to the United States and other countries.

Elyne Mitchell has written thirty books and has had articles, poetry and short stories published in journals and collections. Her success is a reminder that people of energy, originality and talent are not confined to the cities but may also be found in the quiet places so easily neglected today. Mrs Mitchell still lives at Towong Hill and takes an active role in the running of the property. Like many successful people she has directed her talents to more than one field. She has made a contribution to Australian history, sport, politics, agriculture and recreation. Her contribution to Australian literature has brought the Upper Murray region, its bush, the mountains and the snow to people around the world.

Thirtieth Day of April One Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety Three