

MS DOROTHY DICKSON ROSS

Citation for the conferral of the degree of Doctor of the University (*honoris causa*)

Dorothy Ross was born on 13th January 1928, the third daughter of John and Rita Ross.

Dorothy grew up on a grazing property in a busy family of four daughters and one son, in an atmosphere where community service was accepted as the norm. Both her parents were very active in politics: her mother Rita was Vice President of the NSW CWA, and her father John served one term as the Member for Albury in the NSW Legislative Assembly, and 49 years as a Holbrook Shire councillor.

Dorothy attended boarding schools and then trained as a physical education teacher in England. She returned to live at Holbrook in the early 1950s, when she joined the staff on her parents' property "Kanimbla". A few years later she purchased 500 acres from her father, in two large, unimproved paddocks, and this became her own property "Tintagel" where Dorothy has lived ever since.

Dorothy was a pioneer in those days: a single woman who ran her own farming property. She grew merino sheep, Angus cattle, and Connemara ponies - the latter took her from a long career of riding horses and playing polocrosse to the more sedate role of driving her sulky. She retired from this activity when "the horses got too old and lost interest".

The development of her farm remains one of Dorothy's proudest achievements. The fact that she could do it on her own means, to her, that other women can too.

This is also the theme which runs through Dorothy's recounting of her very active career in community service and political organisations.

That career began when Dorothy joined the Holbrook CWA, in the early 1950s. Over the years she took office at various levels, and rose to be the NSW State President from 1971-74, and later the first elected National President of the CWA, 1985-88.

She was the only woman member of the short-lived National Rural Advisory Council 1974-75, which was set up by the Labor Minister for Primary Industry to give advice on rural matters. She acted as a consultant to the Australian Law Reform Commission, 1983-85; was a member of the Holbrook Shire Council and the Murray Regional Advisory Committee; a director of the Winifred West Schools; and has been Honorary Director of the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Inc.

Dorothy is a founder Director of the Australian Rural Leadership Program. This innovative scheme began in 1993, and the first graduates will soon emerge. The program selects 30 young Australians each year, for a two-year training program which will familiarise each of them with all of Australia's rural industries, through every stage of the processes involved in taking primary produce from harvesting to processing, manufacture, sale and export. The trainees participate six times each

year in one week sessions, thus gaining a total of 12 weeks intensive familiarisation, at no cost to themselves apart from their time.

Dorothy Ross almost succeeded in becoming the first Country Party woman senator, when she ran - last on the ticket - in the 1975 and 1977 elections. She missed out by only 850 votes in 1975, and the second time was narrowly defeated by the newly-emerging Democrats.

In 1976 Dorothy responded to an advertisement in the press calling for community members of the newly-formed Australian Press Council. This began her long and active involvement: she was the Vice Chairman for many years, and has been an extremely effective representative of the public on this council. Members of the Australian Press Council were impressed by her dedication, loyalty, integrity, tact and commonsense.

Dorothy has another connection with the press: since 1973 she has contributed a weekly column to *The Land*, and is proud that in 21 years she has never missed a deadline. She has also been a columnist for the *Border Morning Mail*, the *Wagga Daily Advertiser*, and *Bulk Wheat*. In addition, Dorothy is the founder editor of the lively Holbrook church newsletter, *Knox News*.

But it was in the CWA that Dorothy's career of public service began, and it was largely from her experience in this organisation that her national exposure and appointment to other positions came. The fact that she was a practising farmer gave her a unique understanding of conditions experienced by women on the land.

Dorothy has been a tireless promoter of rural life and rural people, especially women. She is also a convincing promoter of the CWA, saying that it is an arena where women of no particular specialist skills can develop their confidence and ability in public affairs. "If I could do it, they can", she is fond of saying.

However, it is hard to see that "just anyone" could achieve what Dorothy did as CWA president, both at state and federal levels.

She was the youngest and only single woman elected as State President. She encouraged decentralisation, holding State Conferences at various centres such as Broken Hill; she organised a 3-month relay of the CWA flag from Darwin to Perth for the Associated Country Women of the World Conference in 1974; under her leadership the constitution was re-written, and property in Sydney redeveloped. She led many delegations, and was consulted and appointed to a number of bodies.

As National President, she instigated and carried out a survey of rural women, resulting in a report to the government and a publication in conjunction with the Office of the Status of Women, *Life Has Never Been Easy*. This was the first time rural needs had been assessed and documented in such a way.

As well, she collated resolutions passed by all state CWAs, printed as *Getting Things Done*, and convened a CWA SIFFT (Social Issues Fact Finding Team) to identify areas of concern and initiate action to address them.

As a gift to the new Parliament House in Canberra, Dorothy organised the states to contribute and she arranged for the government to accept a sundial for the forecourt of the House where it will always be a symbol of the relationship between CWA and the government.

Dorothy Ross was awarded an OBE in 1975 for service to country women; the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977; and an A.M. in 1991, also for service to country women.

Charles Sturt University was established in July 1989, but its predecessor institutions - Mitchell CAE in Bathurst, and the Riverina-Murray IHE in Wagga and Albury - go back several years earlier. Dorothy Ross began her association with what was to become this University when she was appointed a member of the Riverina College of Advanced Education Council in 1973, and a member of the College's Albury - Wodonga Advisory Council.

The mission of Charles Sturt University is to provide high quality, accessible education particularly to people in the communities of western and south-western New South Wales.

It is fitting that a person who has similarly devoted her career in public service to the betterment of rural communities, and who exemplifies the success which rural women can achieve, should be the recipient of this high honour of the degree of Doctor of the University.

Dated this Sixth Day of May One Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety Four