

SR MARGARET ROSARIE CONNELL

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

Sister Rosarie Connell, PBVM is a distinguished educator and administrator, whose career already spans more than fifty years. She is widely acknowledged within the profession as a pioneer of coeducational senior high schools. But those of you who have been her pupils in Wagga Wagga, Young, Sutherland and Five Dock will know her best as an inspiring teacher of history and English.

She has described herself as 'the travelling nun' - a sly allusion to the sobriquet of the Presentation Sisters' founder, Nano Nagle, who was popularly dubbed 'the walking nun'. And, in truth, her career has been both varied and peripatetic; though her roots - like those of her Congregation - are in the Riverina, where the Presentation Sisters established their mother house in 1874.

She was born in Finley on 19 March 1921, the sixth of ten children of small selector parents, and christened Margaret Connell. Hers was an Irish Catholic upbringing of the kind so memorably captured in the verses of Narrandera's Father Hartigan, more familiarly known as the poet John O'Brien. Her 'old bush school' quite literally was in the middle of a wheat paddock at 'Keringa Park', between Matong and Grong Grong, where her family had taken up a farm in 1927.

From Matong she went on a bursary to the Presentation Sisters' Mount Erin High School at Wagga Wagga in 1934, and sat for her Leaving Certificate in 1938. She took her vows, and the name 'Rosarie', at Mount Erin Convent - having already completed her teaching certificate at the Presentation Training School in 1941 - then taught at Mount Erin High School, and afterwards at her Congregation's Juniorate in Hunters Hill.

In 1956 she entered The University of Sydney, graduating Bachelor of Arts with majors in English, history and Latin in 1958. Two years later she completed the Diploma of Theology course at Manly. Appointed senior English/history teacher at Domremy College in Five Dock, she remained there until 1963, when she returned to Wagga Wagga as senior English/History teacher and mistress of Mount Erin's boarding school. Whilst serving at Mount Erin in 1966, she began to experiment with coeducational classes for her year 11 girls and year 11 boys from the Christian Brothers' St Michael's High School. The experiment, as she frankly admitted, was driven by fiscal expediency. Unless they combined classes, there was simply no way the two schools could cope with the academic pressures of the new Wyndham Scheme, which extended the curriculum by an additional year.

With that decision, 'the travelling nun' and her charges embarked on the most recent chapter in what Rosarie herself has called the Mount Erin 'bus tradition'.

The 'bus tradition' began soon after the nuns settled on the 'Mount' in 1876, as a means of maintaining their teaching commitments with the parochial schools of St Joseph's and St Michael's. Each weekday during term, the nuns clattered down the hill in a horse-drawn vehicle reminiscent of John O'Brien's 'Old Mass Shandrydan' - which a few of you at least may recall as having been 'fashioned in a nightmare by some wandering genius/It wasn't quite a wagon, and it wasn't quite a bus'. Drawn by a succession of redoubtable steeds, the convent 'bus' remained a familiar feature of Wagga Wagga life until the 1950s, when 'the

Sisters took on the mask of anonymity in the form of a taxi, and Rex (the last of the convent horses) was put out to grass’.

Now firmly in the era of the horseless carriage, the nuns’ latest ‘travelling experiment’ continued throughout 1966 and 1967 in a cheap second hand bus which Sister Rosarie had bought specifically for the purpose. What had begun as a half-day program quickly became ‘an horrendous timetabling headache’, with the ‘girls of St Mick’s’ taking their science and maths with their male counterparts in Tarcutta Street during the mornings, and the ‘boys of Mt Erin’ travelling to the hallowed halls of the convent’s original boarding school for their afternoon dose of humanities and special electives. So successful were the first year’s Higher School Certificate candidates that a public meeting of parents on Friday, 26 January 1968 resolved to create a new coeducational senior high school, which opened for business in demountable buildings on Mount Erin lands on the following Monday. The school’s principal was Sister Rosarie, and her deputy a Christian Brother.

Trinity Senior High School, as it afterwards was called, was one of the first coeducational senior high schools established in Australia. At this distance its advantages appear indubitable. But in the 1970s the concept was strongly contested, with the result that Rosarie found herself in heavy demand as a speaker at conferences. Rereading the papers she delivered to the Australian College of Education and the Catholic Secondary Schools Association, one cannot but admire her determination, her flexibility, and her outspoken advocacy in the face of vehement opposition from within and without the Church.

After six years at Trinity, Sister Rosarie became principal of Young Catholic Secondary School, then deputy principal of Mary Immaculate High School Sutherland and Wagga’s Mount Erin High School. She was also superior of Five Dock’s Presentation Convent in 1975 - 77, and bursar at the Wagga Convent in 1981 - 82; subsequently serving as Congregational secretary-general, and a member of the governing bodies of this University’s precursor institutions, the Riverina College of Advanced Education and the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education.

In 1982 Sister Rosarie went to live at her Congregation’s Yarralumla Convent, and enrolled in the graduate course in information management at Canberra College of Advanced Education, completing her practical work in the Manuscripts Division at the National Library of Australia. She currently is archivist for the Presentation Sisters’ Congregation.

‘I don’t see myself as a public figure or an academic’, she said recently. ‘I’m a working woman with my hands in the dough.’

In recognition of outstanding service to education and administration, particularly in the Riverina region, the Board of Governors has to-day conferred the degree Doctor of Education (*honoris causa*) on Margaret Rosarie Connell.

Dated this Twenty Fourth Day of April One Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety Eight