

DAME LEONIE KRAMER AC DBE

1924–2016

FELLOW · ELECTED 1974



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Dame Leonie Kramer was appointed to the staff of the University of Sydney in 1968 as Professor of Australian Literature; she retired as its Chancellor in 2001. Those thirty-three years were a time of tumultuous change in Australia's social, political and cultural life, not least in the field of tertiary education. For much of that time, she was, as the university's current Vice-Chancellor Dr. Michael Spence recently acknowledged, 'the principal public face of the University of Sydney'.

Born in Melbourne in 1924, Leonie Judith Gibson was educated at the Presbyterian Ladies' College, followed by the University of Melbourne, where she gained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1945 and the University of Oxford, where she gained a PhD in 1953. During her postgraduate years at Oxford she tutored at St Hugh's College. In 1952 she married Harold Kramer, a South African doctor, and they returned to Australia partly because of an antipathy to his country's apartheid regime.

Dame Leonie's academic career began with her appointment in 1958 as a lecturer in English at the University of New South Wales, with subsequent promotions to senior lecturer and associate professor.

In 1968 she was offered the Sydney Chair in Australian Literature, succeeding the first appointee, G. A. Wilkes, and remained there until her retirement in 1989.

Established in 1963 in response to a public fundraising campaign, the Sydney chair was the first and for many years the only chair in the world dedicated to the study of Australian literature. Dame Leonie's contribution to the teaching of Australian literature at Sydney was arguably the major achievement of her career. In the 1960s, Australian literature was still a relatively new academic subject and it had a limited role in the undergraduate curriculum, with the English major dominated by the British canon. Her appointment was soon followed, in the early 1970s, by the establishment of a course dedicated to Australian literature. It proved extremely popular with students and was developed into a major with greatly expanded curriculum. Then and since, these innovations have met with fierce opposition but can be seen in retrospect as the necessary and enabling conditions for the subject's development.

The late 1970s to the early 1990s saw a continuous expansion of the Australian literature courses. At its peak in the early 1990s, fuelled by strong numbers of overseas students, the curriculum comprised over 300 titles, many by living writers. This had an incalculably positive effect on the publication and informed reception of Australian literature as both an academic discipline and a field of cultural production.

Dame Leonie also hosted some of the first postgraduate students from the Peoples' Republic of China to arrive in Australia after the end of the Cultural Revolution, supervising the degrees of the so-called 'Gang of 9', who went on to become the leading advocates of Australian literary studies in China. It is impossible to travel in China today without being reminded of her legacy, usually by the students of the 'Gang of 9', who are now full professors and directors of Australian Studies Centres. Many thousands of students of Australian literature in China today, aware of this legacy, speak respectfully of 'the Australian literature department' at Sydney.

The AustLit bibliographic database lists more than 160 works written by Leonie Kramer. Among her most recent publications is an essay on censorship published in *Quadrant* in 2008. Her first publication was in

1954, making a 55-year track record of writing about Australian literature. Over that period, Dame Leonie published widely on the core writers of the late nineteenth and mid twentieth-century canon. Looking through her many publications, we can see that she was reading, thinking deeply about and responding to many of the key works in Australian literature and criticism as soon as they were published. Always an incisive reviewer, she picked out and championed many new writers from their earliest appearance. Equally, she championed some established writers whose careers were on the point of unwarranted neglect.

Two of her enduring interests were the poetry of her friend and fellow-conservative, James McAuley, and the early twentieth-century novelist Henry Handel Richardson. A major strand of her work was the appreciation of Australian poetry; she published books on McAuley (1988), A. D. Hope (1979), and Henry Kendall (1973), and significant studies of Judith Wright, David Campbell, Rosemary Dobson, Kenneth Slessor and Douglas Stewart. Funds contributed to mark her retirement from the Chair of Australian Literature were at her request used to establish the Dame Leonie Kramer Prize for the best thesis on Australian poetry.

She was elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1974 and served as a member of Council from 1978–80. In 1983 she was appointed a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to literature and a decade later was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia. She was awarded honorary doctorates by five Australian universities and named an Australian National Living Treasure by the National Trust in 1997.

Dame Leonie was a fearless public intellectual and controversialist in the culture wars of the 1970s and 1980s. As she freely admitted, she was antipathetic to many of the intellectual movements that had swept through and transformed humanities disciplines from the time of her professorial appointment in the late 1960s, including Marxism, feminism, deconstruction and post-colonialism. This was confirmed by the unprecedented critical debate that greeted the publication of *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, which she edited, in 1981.

The title of her 2012 memoir, *Broomstick*, alludes to the forceful nature of her interventions in the public sphere and the controversial reactions she often encountered and relished. In it she writes that from the 1960s onwards

[the word] conservative became a pejorative term, and those of us who challenged the progressive movement were caricatured as people afraid of change, determined to freeze the past and to allow its mistakes to disappear from memory, so as better to retain only the sentimentalised dream of an imagined paradise lost. In fact, we conservatives were reformers, and our opponents did not recognise that the concept

of conservatism was an intellectual position with a distinguished philosophical history.

In print, and on radio and television, Dame Leonie became an influential public figure and advocate for the conservative cause. Laurie Hergenhan FAHA, the founding editor of *Australian Literary Studies*, recalls her as ‘a doughty combatant’: ‘She was witty (at times mischievous), coolly logical, even steely ... in debate’. She sat on many boards and committees, and for a time was one of the few women fulfilling such a role in Australian public life – though as she and others have noted, she was not a feminist. Her daughters have said that she accepted every invitation that came her way. From 1989–91 she was Deputy Chancellor of the University of Sydney and then, from 1991–2001, Chancellor. She also served on many public bodies and corporate boards. She was a member of the boards of Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital, the Queen Elizabeth II Trust, the ANZ bank, Western Mining Corporation, and the NRMA. She served as chairman of the journal *Quadrant*, the National Institute of Dramatic Art and the ABC, and as a Commissioner of the Electricity Commission of New South Wales.

I once asked Dame Leonie how she reconciled her academic and corporate commitments. She explained that, like the Cambridge literary critic F. R. Leavis, she saw the study of literature as a core discipline of humanist learning, as central, in fact, to the modern university, and she believed it essential that people so trained should take their place alongside those trained in other disciplines, such as the sciences, engineering, and economics.

I last saw Dame Leonie on 8 April 2009, when I spoke at a ceremony in the University of Sydney’s John Woolley Building on the occasion of her receiving the award of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*). On that evening, the four Sydney professors of Australian literature were photographed together: Gerry Wilkes (1963–1967), Leonie Kramer (1968–1989), Elizabeth Webby (1990–2006) and myself (2007–). At the time, it struck me as a notable moment, personifying the unique, half-century long history of Australian literature at the University of Sydney, and one that was unlikely to present itself again. And so it has proven to be.

Dame Leonie Kramer died on 20 April 2016 at Lulworth House at Elizabeth Bay, where a number of other distinguished Australians of her generation had also been resident, including Gough Whitlam and Neville Wran. Ironically, Lulworth had been the childhood home of one of her greatest and most formidable literary antagonists, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Patrick White. I have no doubt that she would have relished that irony. She is survived by her daughters Jocelyn and Hillary and two grandchildren.

ROBERT DIXON FAHA