

## Obituaries

- by Murray Horton

### Betty Roberts

Betty Roberts, who died in September 2008, aged 89, was a fixture of the Christchurch progressive movement for many decades and in many different capacities – for instance, she was a leading feminist, peace activist, community activist for a multitude of groups and sectors, local body politician and a tireless political activist at all levels of the political process. She was a CAFCA member from 1985 until 2005 when old age and ill health forced her to give it up; likewise she was a member of the Anti-Bases Campaign from 1993 until the same reasons forced her to give that up in 2006. She was a regular donor to both groups and from 1992 until 2004 she donated a total of several hundred dollars to the CAFCA/ABC Organiser Account, which provides my income.

And she was living proof that appearances can be deceiving. She was always immaculately dressed and well spoken (until I went to her memorial meeting, I had no inkling that she was actually an Aussie and had lived the first half of her long life there – she betrayed no trace of an Australian accent). Photos of her throughout the Australian first half of her life show her in gowns, gloves and jewellery, socialising with the upper crust and then later, in Christchurch, as a gracious hostess entertaining distinguished visitors (although she'd ditched the gowns and gloves by then). She and her husband Norman, to whom she was married for 66 years until death separated them (he is 94), lived for around 40 years in a home with a beautiful garden, in a private lane, on the Cashmere Hills. To the casual acquaintance, she could be mistaken for a typical Cashmere lady. She came from a privileged background in her native Australia – her father was a leading academic who, in retirement, became a Liberal (i.e. conservative) MP in the Federal Parliament. He was influential enough to be consulted as a constitutional expert by the New South Wales (NSW) Governor who wanted advice on whether he could dismiss the State's Labor Premier during the Depression. Betty's father advised him to do so and the Premier was duly fired. Her political journey can be measured by the fact that as a teenager, in the 1930s, she was taken by her family to see all the sights in pre-war Britain and Europe; 50 years later she was a political tourist to rather less fashionable countries like China and North Korea.

Betty Bland was born in Sydney in 1919, into a world just coming out of the horrors of the First World War and in the grip of the flu pandemic which killed tens of millions more than the war did. "I was probably very special being the first girl and surviving the flu epidemic at the time of my birth" (manuscript on Betty Roberts' life, written by Jennifer Evans for a Sociology paper in 1989 and updated to be presented to Betty for her 80th birthday in 1999). Her family was active in both politics and the Anglican Church, her father was the Foundation Professor of Public Administration at Sydney University. When Betty was four the family relocated to the Blue Mountains, to provide a healthier environment for her and her brothers (one of whom died of leukaemia at the tragically young age of 14, an event which traumatised the whole family). "Probably because the family wanted to build up Betty's health after whooping cough, etc, and because school was so far away and through the bush, she did not go to school until she was seven year old, the legal limit" (ibid.). The family moved back into Sydney to be closer to the kids' schools.

#### Childhood During The Depression

"By the time the Blands had settled in Strathfield the economic depression in Australia was well underway. Mr Bland kept his job at the University, though all teaching salaries were cut by 30%. Betty remembers a constant stream of unemployed people at their door. These unemployed people were given a meal or a job of work. If you had work and therefore had an income you tried to share it around for other people, and so found all sorts of jobs to do around the place. A lot of hawkers came to the door selling shoelaces, cotton, pins and such things.

"The Depression had a big effect on everyone; it made a very strong impression on Betty. In August 1929 wool prices fell heavily and in the same month, London financial houses refused any further long term loans. The Scullin Labor government came into office in October. Betty recalls : 'In NSW the Government Savings Bank had closed because everyone tried to withdraw savings at once. Thomas Laing, (State) Premier, declared a moratorium on payment of overseas debts. In the resultant outcry the (State) Governor consulted Dad as Constitutional Expert and he recommended that the Premier be dismissed. He was. The only other time the Governor or Governor-General has exercised such power was in the case of Whitlam (*the Labor Prime Minister fired by the Governor-General in 1975's bloodless constitutional coup. Ed.*). The tension in our house at the time was really high, the phone never stopped" (ibid.). The Depression was a killer, bringing TB and malnutrition in its wake. A young unemployed woman, a next door neighbour, died of TB. "The Depression made a very strong impact on Betty. She had a feeling of having to study well to get a good job later and this concern probably influenced her to take the first job offered" (ibid.).

Betty's attendance at a Sydney girls' high school made a lifelong impression on her, as evidenced by the fact that those attending her Christchurch memorial meeting were asked to sing the school song – not once but several times. After five years at high school, her family thought, over her objections, that she was too young to go to university, at 16, so she was sent up to the colder northern tablelands of NSW to attend a girls' school. "Half the people were very snobby, they all got their wealth from land" (ibid.). She was only there nine months before her father removed her in order to accompany the rest of the family on their trip to Britain and Europe.

### **Student Christian Movement, Pacifism & Marriage**

Upon returning home, she started at Sydney University. This marked the real beginning of her life as an activist. She graduated with a First Class Honours degree in History and Second Class Honours in English. She joined a whole variety of clubs and societies, with the Student Christian Movement (SCM) being her top priority. She became national Secretary and, at 19, national President. This involved her regularly travelling to NSW conferences and to Melbourne for national committee meetings. It was at SCM that she met the young Norman Roberts, who was President of the post-graduate branch (in his eulogy at her memorial meeting, Norman said that his first impression of SCM was that it was "too wowserish").

In her third year at Sydney she got her first job, in the University Library. "My father was terribly cross about my taking the job – he thought I could have gone on and got a university scholarship. I really loved university and hated leaving it. I loved the Gothic buildings, the atmosphere, the students, SCM conferences, the Balls (in spite of the problem of a partner), the carillon and the processions. I guess I'd been going there with my father as long as I could remember and maybe I took the first job offering in the Fisher Library to prolong my association" (ibid.). At her memorial meeting a 92 year old friend from those days told us how he and Betty had "danced, danced, danced all night" at one of those Balls. In his eulogy, Norman brought the house down when he replied : "As you can see, I had my rivals".

World War Two broke out while she was at university. "We were very upset. I was a pacifist and we supported (*British Prime Minister*) Chamberlain trying to stop the war. I fell out with various boyfriends because of my pacifism'. The university campus was split by the pacifist issue. Betty was an extreme pacifist, her father did not go to the first war but was patriotic" (ibid.).

On her 21 st birthday, she announced her engagement to Norman (this was the usual age for girls to get engaged and it was equally common to announce it at their 21 st). 15 months later, in 1941, they got married, bought a house in north Sydney and started a family. "After a brief stint working at (the local) City Council, they had a daughter (*the first of four. Ed.*). Betty Roberts hid her pregnancy until the last possible moment to keep her job. As there was no local kindergarten the couple established one at their home. By the end of the year a paid kindergarten teacher and a different mother on duty each day were caring for 30 children, three days a week. This operated for six years and created a community of mothers interested in the education of their children. During this time she had three more children" (*Press, Obituary, 27/9/08, "An unbending campaigner"*). By way of contrast, when

the Queen visited Australia in 1953, she and her sister were called upon to accompany their widowed father, now a Liberal MP, to royal tour functions in Canberra.

"After the kindergarten era, six years, Betty decided she would like to do some work outside the home. Betty taught Sunday School and was trying to find out what was taught – 'they systematically went through the Bible'. Betty wanted to modify what the children were taught (the diocese in Sydney was very fundamentalist). Betty did a theological course by correspondence, also a training course in scripture reading. She passed with distinction. 'I thought I would teach scripture in the schools – I had the idea of getting a bit more liberal teaching into the school religious courses'" (manuscript, *ibid.*). "As her elder children progressed beyond kindergarten, she arranged for a Girl Guides and Brownies organisation in the district. This allowed her daughters to be initiated into camping and bushwalking and to form a lifelong love of the wild. Respect for nature, and its importance to people, led the Roberts to organise for the establishment of a bird reserve in a large gully, near their house, that was to be subdivided for homes" (*Press*, *ibid.*). And Betty was involved in the big national battles too, such as the campaign, in the depths of 1950s' Cold War hysteria, to prevent the Liberal Government outlawing the former Communist Party of Australia.

### **Christchurch , Feminism & Teaching**

Everything changed in the early 1960s. "He (Norman) felt there was not much prospect for promotion in his present job (a textile physicist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) and saw the opportunity to set up wool research in New Zealand. The move meant leaving Betty's family and friends. Betty prayed he wouldn't get the job. Norman came over to New Zealand for interviews and much to Betty's horror he got the job (*founding Director of the Wool Research Organisation of New Zealand, based at Lincoln College, near Christchurch. Ed.*). 'You can imagine what it was like to move after 20 years in our house. Moving to another country was very traumatic'" (manuscript, *ibid.*). The two youngest daughters came with them, the two oldest stayed in Australia. "The family was welcomed in their local community, thanks to their SCM friends" (*ibid.*) and within months had bought the Cashmere house that was to be their home for around 40 years.

"Betty received a copy of Betty Friedan's "Feminine Mystique" for a Christmas present from a friend and she felt that it changed her life. This was a very important time for Betty, she felt her own views were validated. Up until this time she had felt she was a 'misfit of society' because of her views on women in society. She felt guilty about being discontented with her lot, but she was. The thinking of society seemed to be that a mother's place was in the home, the woman subservient to the male. Magistrates and judges blamed mothers for their children's misconduct, never the father. Betty thought that women had no real political or economic status. "Feminine Mystique" showed her that she was not alone, others thought as she did" (*ibid.*). The story was told at her memorial meeting of the prospective son-in-law who was given a copy of that book to read by Betty and then she tested him on it to make sure that he had read and understood it, before deciding that he would be a suitable husband for her daughter.

She decided to get a career and, in her 40s, trained as a secondary teacher, getting a job teaching English, History and Scripture at Rangi Ruru, a private girls' school. "Betty found teaching hard, English and History not so bad but Scripture hard going. Betty also took Social Living classes as she had been involved with sex education for children in Australia. She used to go around the school and give lectures and show slides, she felt she was well trained in Social Education. 'I didn't believe in the Resurrection, the children told me I had to believe in it. I might not have been much good as a teacher but my Social Education was good'... Betty did not feel successful as a teacher as she was not a disciplinarian. She expected children would want to learn but this was not always the case. Betty felt successful in Social Education and when she became Careers Advisor she felt very comfortable in that job. Betty was able to promote the idea of women taking up work in new fields...

"Betty always put a feminist input into her teaching and staff contacts, but she often found a blank wall with her students. Betty was surprised to find later, so many of her former students were in women's organisations, especially groups working in new fields, such as pornography and anti-beauty contests. Quite a few have subsequently told her they wish they had taken more notice of her views at school... One good thing about going to work was that Betty no longer had to write the hated word housewife on forms, since retirement she

has also refused to do so. 'I write unpaid community worker'. When a doctor wrote housewife as her occupation on a form, 'I wrote immediately asking him to correct his records and whether he would like to be called a househusband'" (ibid.).

### **Women's Movement, Councillor, Saving The Old Stone House**

As a teacher at Rangi she also enjoyed "organising Sixth Form forums in connection with the schools branch of the SCM, and the United Nations Association, in which topical political and social issues were discussed. Finding she was not alone in wanting to be active beyond the domestic sphere, in the mid 60s she worked to help women. After retiring from teaching (*she taught for 13 years. Ed.*), she began researching childcare for low paid women for the Society for Research on Women. She became Chairwoman of the National Organisation for Women (NOW), in 1983 (*until 1986. Ed.*) and oversaw a trebling of membership" (*Press, ibid.*).

"As (NOW) coordinator you could speak up on any issue that affected women – provided your collective approved. There were many issues affecting women at this time so there was a continual response in media statements and letters to the editor. Many submissions were made, newsletters (8-10) sent out each year, letters written to MPs. They also sent nominations of suitable women to boards e.g. park boards. Because Betty was 'retired' she was in a position to respond immediately to items that would appear in the news and so NOW developed a high profile and membership trebled at that time" (manuscript, *ibid.*). For many years Betty organised the annual September 19<sup>th</sup> Women's Suffrage Day Celebrations, which were attended by up to 200 people and she organised a candidates' forum every election year, which she presided over with a bell to shut them up if they exceeded their time limit. The manuscript lists other women's groups with which she was actively involved – "night shelter for women (took four years to establish), Women Against Pornography, Women's Employment Group, Group Against Beauty Contests, Group Against Miss Universe being staged in Christchurch, Budget Submissions Group, and Maternity Action Alliance, which is trying to get better conditions for women in childbirth and to stop the medical interference in the birth process and feeding regimes" (manuscript, *ibid.*).

At the grassroots level Norman and Betty Roberts were known throughout Christchurch for their leading role in saving and restoring Cashmere's Old Stone House (where her memorial meeting was held, entirely fittingly, and where she had presided over those Suffrage Day and election candidates' forums). It started in 1967, and the following year, Norman became the founding Chairman of the Old Stone House Trust. The historic but derelict 19th Century building had been gifted to the University of Canterbury branch of SCM in the mid 60s. "The couple became involved as former SCM members in Sydney; their daughter was a member of the SCM in Christchurch. Fire gutted the building in 1971. Many people said the project should be abandoned but Mr and Mrs Roberts disagreed. 'We felt we must rescue it as a valuable historical relic and for the reputation of the SCM', Mr Roberts said. The fire had trebled the costs of restoration and, amid calls for the building to be bulldozed, a public meeting was called. The meeting proved a turning point in recommending the Old Stone House become a community centre" (*Press, 18/3/03; "The Old Stone House loses two old friends"*).

"They then spent nearly seven years of raising funds by fairs, socials, bottle drives, etc. and applying to councils and Government for funding (and not getting it). Betty and Norman made a huge contribution to Old Stone House as a community centre. After a very difficult period of frustrating problems and fruitless negotiations with the (former) Heathcote County Council and Christchurch City Council, Betty decided to stand for election to the Heathcote County Council (*at the 1977 local body election. Ed.*). It was a last minute decision. 'At midnight I decided to stand. Nominations closed the next day, Friday at noon'. Betty got nominators next morning from two women and two men (two Labour, two National) and her nomination was in by 11.40 a.m. Then came the hard work of finding out what local government issues there were, getting advice on them and making a policy statement and campaign strategy... She was the third highest polling candidate in the County and the first woman representative in Cashmere. 'I thought I had a mandate for the Old Stone House so I went to it with vigour'" (ibid.).

"On the Council she pursued the restoration with vigour. Her zealotry, criticisms of the near-

dysfunctional Council and push for reforms riled fiery County Chairman John McKenzie and rubbed some councillors up the wrong way..." (*Press, Obituary, ibid.*). "I was a thorn in the side because I believed in doing a job thoroughly. I believe my background (father an expert in local government) and my own interest in government made me eminently suitable to be a local government councillor. However, I probably pushed too hard for reforms in all sorts of directions in too short a time and failed to conform to the pattern of compromise which seemed to be an essential part of politics'...Norman had been very supportive but being on the Council was very stressful and by the time Betty's term had finished (1980) she did not contemplate a second term" (manuscript, *ibid.*).

### **Awards, An Open Home, Travel**

But she had the last laugh, as she accomplished her goal during her single term as a councillor and secured the necessary funding, from both Councils, for the quality restoration of the Old Stone House, which is now the home of the Cracroft Community Centre. In 1990 Betty and Norman wrote the history of the Old Stone House; in 2002 they were both awarded Queen's Service Medals for community service, specifically their role in saving and restoring the Old Stone House (they had already received Community Services Awards from the Christchurch City Council, in 1999). They retired from the Cracroft Community Centre in 2003, when both well into their 80s, after 35 years involvement with it (Betty's final role was as its newsletter editor for many years). Nor did the pyrotechnics of her single term as an elected representative diminish her interest in local government; she remained a local politics activist all her life. And, as one of her daughters told those attending her memorial meeting, she regularly wrote to Ministers "telling them how to do their jobs better" (one Minister in the former Labour government, who couldn't attend in person, sent a warm tribute to be read out at the memorial meeting).

Betty and Norman's Cashmere home was a virtual open home for all manner of friends and strangers. She was a great hostess, always entertaining and feeding guests. Her idiosyncrasies as hostess were recounted by several speakers at her memorial meeting. Her favourite meal to serve guests was a roast, which led to her being duly reprimanded by one particular lady who informed her that in Canterbury roast was reserved for Sunday lunch. Her kids told of her instructions for them to waylay guests and take them on a lengthy tour of the garden while she frantically made last minute preparations. One son in-law described how her dinners were always a work in progress and how, on one occasion, "I think we had the gravy with the dessert".

Betty always loved travel and did as much of it as possible. There was a family world trip in 1965, which included off the beaten track destinations such as Lebanon and Pakistan. She also regularly accompanied Norman when he went to international conferences. When he retired as Director of the Wool Research Organisation, they had a fortnight in the Cook Islands. "I thought it was wonderful. Riding a bicycle on the pot hole roads took its toll, but living on fruit and crossing the lawn and road to swim in lagoons was paradise" (*ibid.*). In the 80s they visited China and North Korea a couple of times. They "found North Korea most impressive, to see a country which had been napalm bombed to a rubble 30 years previously rise like a phoenix" (*ibid.*). They travelled there at the invitation of the NZ Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea Society, of which their daughter Cynthia was a committee member for decades (as I was in the 70s and early 80s. I used to attend committee meetings at Cynthia's then home. I didn't see her again until her mother's memorial meeting in 2008).

### **Veteran Peace Activist**

I will quote from the speech delivered at her memorial meeting by Kate Dewes, Christchurch's internationally renowned peace activist (I am indebted to Kate for lending me the manuscript from which I have sourced nearly all of this obituary). "Betty and Norman became my foster peace parents in Christchurch many years ago...I knew of Betty and Norman before I met them, through their letters to the *Press*. They wrote on a wide range of issues, and I was inspired by their thoughtful, well researched and challenging arguments... This is what I loved about Betty (*i.e. being uncompromising. Ed.*). This trait was also evident in her friend Harold Evans, who had the principled audacity to initiate a project in 1986 to ask the World Court to give an advisory opinion on the legal status of nuclear weapons. Norman and Betty were always great supporters of this project, and their belief in it, and us,

helped sustain us through some very lonely and hard times at the United Nations and World Court... (for the obituary of Harold Evans by Kate Dewes and myself, see Peace Researcher 33, November 2006, which can be read online at <http://www.converge.org.nz/abc/pr33-132a.html> Ed.).

"...Betty maintained a strong interest in the work which Rob (*Green, Kate's husband. Ed.*) and I were doing. She would phone regularly to get an update on what we were up to even when she was finding it hard to speak. I will never forget her coming out in the freezing cold in her wheelchair in winter (2007) to the opening of the Nuclear Free Nation Exhibition at the Museum. She was determined to be there despite her many health problems. She also generously gifted many of her peace and justice papers and books to the Peace Collection at the MacMillan Brown Library (University of Canterbury). Ten years ago, in 1998, Betty invited me to speak at the National Organisation for Women Annual Suffrage Day Dinner...In her vibrant and entertaining newsletter she described each of us (*the speakers. Ed.*) in some detail. She acknowledged the difficulty she had writing about peaceful projects without using the language of war. For example, when writing Elsie Locke's background, she used the words 'campaign, struggle, fight, battle, combat'. She wrote : 'I'll try to do better, bearing in mind that language shapes the way we think'. Having just married a former British Commander who flew nukes around, I knew how ingrained such military language could be'... ( for my obituary of Elsie Locke, see Watchdog 97, August 2001, which can be read online at <http://www.converge.org.nz/watchdog/97/13.htm>. Ed.).

"On another occasion Betty invited me to address the National Organisation for Women about juggling a young family as a solo mother with my peace work. In doing so she gave an opportunity for honest exchanges of how, as she said, 'women had to be two people – the private mum and the public career person'. Like Betty, many of us were limited in our choice of career by having to care for our young families. However, it was women like Betty, Elsie Locke and others who were our role models; they were the wise older women who encouraged us to break through these barriers, reassuring me that my kids would not suffer from sharing their mother with the wider community"...

### She Made A Difference

Betty became very frail and wheelchair bound in her final years, when I only ever saw her at funerals. She and Norman went into a home. But she never lost her spirit or her sense of humour. In her 1999 generic letter to "Very Dear Friends and Rellies", thanking them for putting on her 80 th birthday party (at which she was presented with the "This Is Your Life" manuscript which I've quoted throughout), she concluded : "As an afterthought born of a market led economy – if you're not yet 80 you can think about how turning 80 must lead to a great increase in the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). In my case, not only were there your contributions, I've added my bit too - doctor's and chemist's fees needed for driver's licence, and its own fee; new glasses (optometrist's fee); and new tooth (dentist's fee). It pays the State to keep you alive!!!"

Betty Roberts lived a very long life, one devoted to feminism, peace, social justice, democracy and community activism, as well as her family and friends. She was a true servant of the community. Coming from the background that she did, it could have easily been so different, a life of self-indulgence with a bit of charitable good works thrown in to salve the odd pangs of conscience. That was far from the case with Betty. The word stalwart is over used but it is eminently applicable to her. For decades she was a stalwart of many campaigns in Christchurch, and a leader of several. Betty was a person of whom it could be truthfully said : "She made a difference; she left the world a better place".

### Death In The Family: Brownie Dann

CAFCA expresses our condolences to Christine and Robyn Dann, who are both members (a founding member, in Christine's case) for the death of their father, **Brownie** Dann, who died in Christchurch in August 2008, aged 92. Christine shares some memories of her dad.

Dad was born in Christchurch and lived there all his life, apart from an involuntary sojourn in a prisoner-of-war camp in Austria during World War 2. He was a carpenter by trade, working

first on building houses and then as a factory maintenance carpenter. Outside of paid work hours he worked for his family, growing great veges and fruit, making playthings for his three children (from swings to doll's houses), taking us on walks and holiday excursions, and reading us bedtime stories. He also did voluntary work for the community all his life, giving sterling service to the Beckenham School Committee and the Ex-Prisoners-Of-War Association for many years (*which is where I first met him, a long time before I met either daughter. My late father was a WW2 prisoner of war and I accompanied my parents to the Association's social functions when I was a kid. Ed.*). When our late mother contracted Alzheimer's Disease he volunteered for the Alzheimer's Society, and was organising the local branch mail outs up until the week he died. After he retired he was also kept busy assisting with renovations on his children's houses right into his late 80s, and with developing and maintaining facilities at the Cashmere Club.

His only involvement with national politics that I know about was his active membership of the Labour Party in the early 1980s, when he campaigned for Labour in the Lyttelton electorate in 1984. By 1987 he had become disillusioned with what the Party was doing in power, and by 1990 he was so disgusted at the sell-off of New Zealand's assets and the impoverishment of its working people wrought by Roger Douglas, Richard Prebble and the rest of the neo-liberal wolves in sheep's clothing that he said he wasn't voting for that lot again and voted Green.

He was always Left of centre, albeit in a quiet way. He followed global political events, and sometimes took personal action. I first realised this in 1966 when the family had recently got its first car, and Dad refused to buy Caltex petrol in a personal protest against the Suharto-led coup in Indonesia (I was only 14 at the time and to this day still don't know what the connection was - perhaps a reader could enlighten me). A rugby fan all his life, his personal protest against the 1981 Springbok Tour was not to attend any of the matches or to watch them on TV (he must have watched footage of the Christchurch demonstrations against them though, because he told me he saw Rod Donald among the group who were dismantling a paling fence Dad had built outside Lancaster Park).

He was as disgusted as most New Zealanders with the bellicose foreign policy of the Bush administration, and just before he died he was reading a biography of Barack Obama, perhaps to see if he would make much of a difference. I think the most important "political" message I got from Dad, though, was not anything in particular that he said or did, but the way that he lived his life. He put people before money and possessions, and being of service to others before "getting ahead" for himself. He didn't preach about this - he just went and did it. A great example for his children and grandchildren, and anyone else who was lucky enough to know him.

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#### **Non-Members:**

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