

## **ROSA EDITH OLIVER**

**3 August 1921 – 16<sup>th</sup> May 2012**

**- Evin Wood**

She will be remembered for her strong humanitarian, ethical and political beliefs and the tenacious way she stuck to them. Rosa Oliver was born in 1921 at Mexborough, South Yorkshire. She grew up and was schooled at Mexborough Grammar in the 1930s. It was a time of “Depression” in the mining area of South Yorkshire and during her early life she lost both her natural father and then her stepfather; both of these men she admired greatly. Rosa witnessed the hardships of the Depression but was fortunate to have parents who were very loving and caring and who were around, not only to look after their family, but who went out of their way to help others less fortunate than them during this time. Both Rosa and Mary (her elder sister) inherited the love and caring that their parents had shown. In the late 1930s she moved south with her mother and sister to Winchester in Hampshire. Due to hardship and the 1939-45 war she had to delay university education.

Eventually she went into further education and eventually become a teacher and a posting in Camberley in Surrey where she taught and lived, up to the early 1960s. During this time she remained in close contact with her mother and sister Mary (who had married). She loved to visit her own family in Winchester and also, when she established her own home, had family visit her. Her mother died in the late 50s and in the early 60s she decided to “up roots” and move to New Zealand to teach French at Marlborough Girls College in Blenheim.

### **50 Years In Blenheim**

Even though Rosa had left her family in the UK, she remained in constant contact either by letter or phone. The family were often to read of the next cause that she would venture into. The letters were always handwritten in Rosa’s inimitable style. Rosa was able to meet all of her great nieces and great nephews either on trips to the UK or on their trips to New Zealand. Rosa’s last 50 years were as a resident of Blenheim, apart from a couple of years when she went to teach in Botswana in the 1970s.

Her experience in Botswana was a very significant experience for her and she had very fond memories of her time there. Rosa had a staunch Christian socialist attitude and a love to help those less fortunate, together with any cause where an injustice had been perceived. It was with the love, caring and sharing Rosa was brought up. With that instilled in her to forever seek caring and justice for those less fortunate than herself. She could only think of love of humanity and abhorred the thought that war could solve anything.

While teaching at Marlborough Girls’ College, Rosa encouraged the students to think about the social issues of the day and as one student said: “We often were able to get Rosa onto topics of social interest rather than the French language that was supposed to be being taught”. She formed a French Club that extended the students into language and social events reflecting French society. Rosa felt very strongly about the situation in South Africa and used her classes and extra-curricular groups to make her views known.

She spoke about the time she had a run-in with the Principal of Girls College, because she was accused of inviting Trevor Richards\* to speak to a group of girls without the Principal's permission. This eventually led to Rosa's resignation. At this time she was saving to return to the UK to catch up with her family but she told an ex-student that she decided to give these saving to HART as "It was the right thing to do". *\*Trevor Richards was the founding leader of Halt All Racist Tours (HART) through the 1970s. You can read my tribute to HART in the Obituaries in Foreign Control Watchdog 72, March 1993, <http://www.historicalwatchdog.blogspot.co.nz/2009/12/foreign-control-watchdog-march-1993.html>. MH.*

Rosa was strongly opposed to cruelty and injustice where ever she perceived it to be, whether against people or animals. She always had two or more cats she was looking after. One of these still is cared for by her neighbours. Rosa was a keen supporter of many social concerns and often attended meetings of various causes held in Blenheim. One such occasion was when a gathering was trying to form an umbrella group to cover issues of peace and human rights. After several hours of interminable discussion it was felt an agreement had been reached and the meeting could conclude, only to have Rosa call out: "What about vivisection?"

### **Active In So Many Causes**

She was a long term staunch supporter of Corso and an active and avid supporter of Trade Aid. When the Trade Aid shop was in Blenheim she was the person responsible to educate the volunteers on the Trade Aide principles which often led to her feelings of frustration about the volunteers' commitment, when it wasn't as strong as hers. She was a long term supporter of the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, as well as the Franciscans religious order and the Howard League for Penal Reform. She wrote and was still writing to people in prison, in both New Zealand and the USA, advocating for their rights. She often provided accommodation in her home for people who found themselves down on their luck, always accepting people as they were.

Writing letters in support of one cause or another took much of her time and there were always letters on the go to one politician or official of one sort or another. She was a very long term supporter of the Labour Party and particularly of David Lange's stand on nuclear issues and Helen Clark's strong leadership. Rosa despaired at the fact many people changed their allegiance to the Green Party when it was formed, which she did too after the Clark government's action over the Seabed and Foreshore Bill.

She had strong empathy with issues for Maori and a strong sympathy with the ideals of Maori Party Co-Leader Tariana Turia. She was very proud of the fact that she would always answer her phone with "kia ora", after the controversy that first caused. She befriended the McDonald family, next door to her home, and they accepted her too as part of their family. They were some of the most regular visitors to her while she was in a rest home. They were able to discuss with her what arrangements she wanted for her funeral and made sure they were carried out.

Rosa nominated BUPA, the British company running her rest home, for CAFCA's annual Roger Award for the Worst Transnational Corporation Operating in Aotearoa/NZ because of the way they exploited the staff and paid such a pittance in wages. BUPA was placed second in 2010. She also supported the Anti-Bases Campaign and was strongly supportive of the annual Waihopai protests. She was delighted to welcome Murray to her rest home when he was in Marlborough in 2011.

Rosa's mind was active up to the last and she regularly did crosswords and puzzles in the *Listener*, to which she was a long term subscriber. She had a phenomenal memory for people and events in her life. She considered herself lucky to have had the life she did. Rosa was forever proud of her name being the same as that of Rosa Parks, the woman who first refused to move to the back of the segregated bus in the southern US in 1955 and helped to initiate the civil rights movement there.

The prayer she asked to be included on her service sheet encapsulated her well. It read:

I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see,

I sought my God, but my God eluded me,

I sought my brother and found all three.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **IN MEMORY OF ROSA OLIVER**

**- Murray Horton**

Although she never joined the Anti-Bases Campaign, Rosa was a regular participant in ABC's protests in Blenheim and at the Waihopai spy base right from the very start in the late 1980s until just a few years ago when old age finally got the better of her and she went into a home. Blenheim is far from fertile ground for peace activists (my sworn affidavit detailing Marlborough institutional prejudice against ABC's Waihopai campaign over the years was the reason that the Domebusters' criminal trial was shifted from Blenheim to Wellington, so that they could get a fair trial) and it takes a brave person to stick their neck out in such a conservative, Tory-voting, military town. For years now ABC has been indebted to a small band of brave souls to be our key contacts and activists in Blenheim (Evin Wood, who wrote Rosa's obituary, is one of them). Rosa was always in the thick of our local supporters. Nothing frightened her. She was garrulous, pugnacious, passionate and fond of a good laugh.

In provincial towns like Blenheim the local activists tend to be involved in everything and Rosa was no exception. She never joined the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCA) either but she always attended whenever I was in town to address a public meeting as part of a CAFCA speaking tour. And I felt the lash of her tongue when I dared to criticise her beloved Labour Party at one such meeting – she was having none of my disparaging of Helen Clark and Michael Cullen. But, as Evin has said, she became disillusioned with Labour and when I visited her at her rest home in 2011 (the last time I saw her, just months before

her 90<sup>th</sup> and final, birthday), she told me she'd swapped to supporting the Greens. She also told me she was deeply saddened by what had happened to "her" Labour Party.

### **Rosa Told It Like It Is**

The purpose of that visit to her rest home (which was in the course of my most recent CAFCA speaking tour) was to inform her that her nomination of BUPA, the British transnational corporation which owned that very rest home, had succeeded in winning it second place in the 2010 Roger Award (you can read the *Judges' Report* at <http://canterbury.cyberplace.co.nz/community/CAFCA/publications/Roger/Roger2010.pdf>). As a matter of policy, CAFCA guards the anonymity of those who send in nominations for the Roger Award. But I'm happy to make an exception for Rosa – she's dead, no harm can come to her and, as she was utterly fearless, she wouldn't mind who knew (she was delighted when I told her about the result of her BUPA nomination). Rosa was never one to mince words - the first reason she listed for her nomination of BUPA was "factory farming of elderly" What a wonderfully concise description of that whole for-profit industry from one of its "battery hens"!

My other hat is the Philippines Solidarity Network of Aotearoa (which, needless to say, Rosa also never joined) and when PSNA sent a speaker (Amirah Ali Lidasan) to Blenheim for the first time in 2007, there was Rosa, larger and louder than life, waiting for us when we arrived at the venue for the public meeting. By that stage Rosa was well into her 80s and living in the rest home but she had rung all her friends and contacts the night before and urged them to attend the meeting. We actually got a credible turnout of 15 at that meeting which, believe me, is good for Blenheim. PSNA missed Rosa's magic touch the next time I accompanied Philippine speakers to Blenheim (Luis Jalandoni and his wife Coni Ledesma, in 2010). Rosa wasn't there, wasn't involved and the attendance at the public meeting was a big fat zero.

Rosa was into everything going (including the campaign asserting the innocence of convicted double murderer Scott Watson). I never knew her personally and that 2011 visit to her rest home unit was the only time I saw her in a private setting. So I was deeply touched to be informed by Evin that when he last spoke to Rosa, a couple of days before her death, she asked him to inform me when she died, and for me to inform the movement. Once met, never forgotten. Complete with her little Noddy car, she reminded me of one of the formidable claymation Northern little old ladies in the marvellous *Wallace And Gromit* films. It is people like Rosa who make a movement and who are particularly invaluable precisely because they are not in the big cities but because they fly the flag in the smaller towns. It takes guts to stick out in a place like Blenheim on an issue like Waihopai (and all the rest) - Rosa had it in spades. Rest in peace old battler, you've earned it.