



Kathleen Fitzpatrick

## **Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

**1905-1990**

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, who died in Melbourne on 27 August 1990, was one of the few prominent women in public life in an era when no woman in Australia had yet become a judge, a divine, a premier, a head of a government department, a captain of industry or a full-ranking professor. And yet many men who attained those positions were influenced by her, indeed deeply impressed by her.

She had a wonderful mastery of the spoken and written word. While she did not reach during the course of a whole year an audience as large as that reached almost every week by such prime ministers as Sir Robert Menzies and E.G. Whitlam she was probably their equal in speech and prose, in timing and sense of theatre, while at the same time remaining indelibly feminine.

Mrs Fitzpatrick probably reached her largest audiences just after the Second World War when she lectured two or three times a week to an overflow audience of first-year students at Melbourne University. Many had just returned from war service in New Guinea and the islands and still wore on wintry afternoons their khaki great coats. Irrespective of their background they soon realized that they were sitting in a kind of intellectual church and that she was the high priest and that a reverential silence was called for. She lectured – no, she held court – on Elizabethan and Puritan England.

Her lectures were probably written out in full but she read them slowly and expressively, turning her eyes on the audience for much of the hour and almost conveying the impression that she was composing each sentence as she delivered it. Her material was carefully arranged, and in that era of the fountain pen and the voluminous taking of notes a large part of what she said was copied down by several hundred fountain pens and, no doubt, delivered back to her at the annual examination. While lecturing she wore a black gown, but partly visible were other clothes impeccably chosen. Everything about her appeared to be carefully chosen but not least the words and the fastidious, measured pronunciation of every word. Her voice was closer to an educated English than Australian voice: the kind of voice that was often associated in Australia with the taking of airs. She claimed no superiority over her audience, and indeed in all her speaking and writing during more than half a century of public life she did not sing her own praises. She did not boast: she had no need to boast.

A remote figure standing aloft on the lecture platform, she was casually called 'Katey' by the students, though not in her hearing. There was a wide gulf between her and nearly all students, and although her formal charm and her fine mind and eloquence easily bridged that gulf the bridge seemed only temporary, a drawbridge that was pulled up as soon as she had completed the last formal sentence of each lecture.

Now that the formal lecture has been devalued in many parts of many tertiary institutions, and is too often drearily delivered, it is easy to

forget that lectures once had a strong intellectual influence and that most earth-shaking or sobering arguments reached an audience initially through the lecture rather than the printed page. Kathleen Fitzpatrick was an ornament of that era, and even medical and engineering students would sometimes slip into the higher benches of the crowded theatre so that they could hear her speak.

She was born in the Victorian gold town of Omeo on 7 September 1905. Her father, H.A. Pitt, was the clerk of courts but during the 1930s depression he headed the State Treasury in Victoria in that frugal era when such a high official conscientiously counted the petty cash as well as the grand items of expenditure. Of his daughter's childhood and schooldays we now know much. Her autobiography, *Solid Bluestone Foundations*, is one of the most perceptive of Australian memoirs.

After studying at Melbourne and Oxford universities and after a brief marriage to the talented historian and radical, Brian Fitzpatrick, she lectured in English and in history, becoming a leading member of Melbourne University's Department of History when, under Professor R.M. Crawford, it was possibly the most influential of all the social sciences and humanities departments in Australia. Soon she became perhaps the best-known female academic in Australia, having been promoted to senior lecturer in 1942 and associate professor in 1948.

Her first book appeared a year later, a study of the famous Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin during the six years (1837-43) in which he was governor of Tasmania. She had a soft spot for hero-adventurers and turned to the Australian explorers, becoming an authority on the Burke and Wills expedition and producing for the World's Classics a 500-page book called *Australian Explorers* (1958). Unrealistically modest, she allowed the explorers to speak for themselves in 470 pages of the book, leaving only 29 pages for her own observations. What she herself observed, pithily and elegantly, provided more insight into the inland explorers, their difficulties and feats, than any previous book on a topic which for decades had been treated as the keystone of Australian history-teaching.

As a writer Kathleen Fitzpatrick rejoiced in the grand opening, and her book *Sir John Franklin in Tasmania* opens with the observation that 'The heart-shaped island of Tasmania hangs like a pendant' while her book on explorers begins with the proclamation that the 'island-continent of Australia is the most ancient land on earth' and the last refuge of 'the vegetable works of the third day of creation'. The hallmark of her prose is lucidity, and rhythm and a power of observation about places and people.

She resigned from the University in her fifties and went to an isolated house overlooking the sea at Cinema Point on the Great Ocean Road where she worked on a long book – never published – on the American novelist, Henry James. Returning eventually to Melbourne, to an apartment overlooking the Botanical Gardens, she again became prominent for a decade or more, writing books, sitting on the University of Melbourne Council, and observing with pungent and polished sentences the state of the nation and the absurd or endearing things that

happened to people.

She was a Foundation Fellow of the Academy and received many other honours. The one that she would have valued the most was not fully given her during her lifetime but is beyond dispute: she was a rare sculptor with words.

*Geoffrey Blainey*