

HELEN WHITTEN FRASER (NEE ROWLAND)



Fraser, Helen Whitten (1921–2012) by Andrew Fraser

Helen Whitten Fraser MBE was a newsagent and bookseller who came to Canberra when she married the local Member of Parliament.

Mrs Fraser, who has died at the age of 91, continued her connection with words in Canberra, working at the National Library and later as a volunteer at St Mark's Theological Library, Barton.

Born Helen Rowland in Glen Innes, in NSW's New England region, she met her future husband, Jim Fraser, when her family invited the then journalist to play tennis on the family court in 1937. She was 16 & he 29.

Their courtship would last 22 years, spanning World War II (in which Fraser served in the 2/1 Field Regiment) and Fraser's election to the House of Representatives in 1951.

Before her marriage, Mrs Fraser worked in the family business, a newsagency, taking over upon the deaths of her father and uncle (within six months of each other), thereby becoming the only female newsagent in NSW. The fact that she excelled in the role was not enough for the Newsagents Registration Board, which directed that the business be sold to a new (male) owner – but not before Helen had made her case, forcefully, to the then head of the board, Rupert Henderson, chief of John Fairfax & Sons.

The Fraser marriage was in Brisbane, where Helen sold books for a time for Thompsons, and the new bride came to a very different world – Canberra in 1959, on the arm of the small city's only parliamentary representative.

It was a unique time and place: one MHR, no Senators, no state nor local government. This was going to be a very public existence for the girl from Glen Innes.

Helen became Regional Commissioner of the Girl Guides, where she had to handle the wide bureaucracy that was the Department of the Interior, and patron of many clubs, including football, netball and softball, but particularly bowling (although never having been a bowler herself). While the roles fell to her initially as the wife of the local Member, so loved in them did she become that she was asked to stay on long after Jim's death. She was made a Member of the British Empire, for community service, in 1970.

After Jim's death the same year, Helen returned to work, first in the Rare Book and Manuscript sections of the National Library, where she made, and reforged, friendships that lasted the rest of her life.

Helen's humour was never far from the surface, developed across decades working with the written word, and always deployed incisively.

Whether it was battling the unyielding head of the newsagents' board, pursuing an errant bureaucrat, guiding a difficult colleague or sticking up for herself, and her nation, against a slightly stuffy official at a Lord's Test, Helen never backed off.

She often said more by saying less. When her son, then 18 and recently made a cadet at The Canberra Times, told of the dual requirements for everything he filed, Helen, then 58, and widowed almost a decade, listened carefully.

Everything, the son relayed, had to be able to be understood by "a 14-year-old boy, or a little old lady in Narrabundah". This, he felt, was a pretty tough ask.

But Helen nodded knowingly. It wouldn't be a problem: "You're not much older than the first one – and you're living with the second!"

Helen Fraser is survived by her son, Andrew, daughter-in-law Catriona Jackson and grandchildren Joel, Meg, Charlie and Stella.

Sue Dumbrell:

Helen & my mother Enid Whitten Haydock nee Rowland, were double cousins and pretty much grew up together.

The two brothers and their wives, who were sisters, their families intermingled so that the townfolk in Glen Innes were never sure whose children they were as they lived so much at each other's homes, school, played and celebrated events and Christmas etc together. It must have been a wondrous childhood for them all. I never saw inside 'Dursley' but 'Fancraft' was a beautiful home with wonderful gardens. It was a shame it was pulled down for a Motel.

My mother Enid and Helen were exceptionally close and were tight up till my Mum died. She was with us at the Nursing Home when my mother died and we shared our grief together. Such love is rare.

Helen then tucked myself and my daughter Frances under her wing and we visited her at her home in Narrabundah ACT often. I felt I lost a very special person when Helen passed away.

I was Bridesmaid for Helen when I was about 14yo. A very special day.

Jim Fraser was Master of Ceremonies at John's and my Wedding Reception in October 1968. Can't get better than that. He was an exceptional man.

FRASER, Helen Whitten. MBE 4-Jan-1921 – 4-Mar-2012

Loved wife of Jim Fraser MHR (deceased).

Mother and mother-in-law of Andrew and Catriona.

Grandma of Joel, Meg, Charlie and Stella. Last surviving member of her generation of the Fancroft and Dursley Rowlands. Patron and supporter of numerous groups and causes. A friend to many. "Blessed are the pure in heart".

Funeral Service for HELEN will be held in the Anglican Parish Church of St. Paul, corner Canberra Avenue and Captain Cook Crescent, Griffith, ACT on Friday (March 9, 2012), commencing at 10.30 a.m. Burial will follow at the Woden Cemetery.

Heartfelt thanks to staff of Carey Gardens, ACT, Doctors and staff from the Emergency Department and Ward 11A (The Canberra Hospital) and National Capital Private Hospital.

WILLIAM COLE FUNERALS Canberra 02 6253 3655

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Farewell to an honourable woman - Graham Downie 6-Mar-2012

Helen Fraser, the wife of one of Canberra's best loved politicians, Jim Fraser, died peacefully in Canberra on Sunday, aged 91.

Mrs Fraser was born in Glen Innes, NSW, in 1921. Remembered by her family as a quiet country girl, she adapted to life in Canberra, frequently at functions beside then prime minister Sir Robert Menzies.

At a Government House function with the Queen, Mrs Fraser had the honour, or task, of cracking the creme brulee. Seen to be hesitating, she was helped by an attendant who offered, "A sharp wrap with the spoon, madam." The blow was administered with complete success.

As a young woman, Mrs Fraser worked in her father's news agency in Glen Innes. After he and his brother died, Mrs Fraser managed the business until telephoned by then chair of the news agents' board, Rupert Albert Geary (Rags) Henderson, who wanted to know who was running the business. She told him she was running it and very well too. But the board soon had the news agency sold because it was being run by a woman.

Jim Fraser, member for the ACT from 1951-70 (when he died in office), went to Glen Innes as a journalist for the Glen Innes Examiner. The electorate of Fraser is named after him. He and Mrs Fraser met on the tennis court when she was 16 and he 29. The courtship lasted 22 years before they were married in Brisbane in 1959.

For the next 11 years, Mrs Fraser accompanied her husband to numerous events, often representing the leader of the Opposition. During that time she met the Queen and then US president Lyndon Johnson.

As regional commissioner for Girl Guides she drove Lady Baden Powell around Canberra. Mrs Fraser was patron of numerous sporting groups.

From 1970 until retirement, she worked for the National Library. She loved books and in retirement worked voluntarily at St Mark's library.

In recognition of her community service, she was made a Member of the British Empire in 1970.

The funeral for Mrs Fraser will be on Friday at 10.30am at St Paul's Anglican Church Manuka.

She is survived by her son, Andrew, daughter-in-law Catriona Jackson and four grandchildren.