

Emeritus Professor Sir Stephen Henry Roberts

Senate's obituary

Emeritus Professor Sir Stephen Henry Roberts, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney from 1947 until his retirement in 1967, died on 19th March, 1971.

Stephen Henry Roberts was appointed to the Challis Chair of History in this University in 1929 and was Professor of History until appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1947. He was Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 1941 to 1947 and Chairman of the Professorial Board in the year 1947. He was an appointed member of the University Extension Board from 1930 to 1947 and became its Chairman in 1940. He maintained his active interest after assuming the office of Vice-Chancellor and continued as Chairman until 1949.

From 1947 until his retirement in 1967 Sir Stephen served the University as Vice-Chancellor, carrying the title Vice-Chancellor and Principal from 1955. As Dean of the Faculty of Arts and as Chairman of the Professorial Board he was a Fellow of the Senate, representative of the teaching staff, and as Vice-Chancellor, an ex officio member. Thus his term as a Fellow extended from 1942 until 1967.

Sir Stephen was Chairman of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee in the year 1952-53. He was a Trustee of the New South Wales Public Library from 1929 to 1967 and a member of the Mitchell Library Committee for twenty-three years of that time. He was Foundation Chairman of the New South Wales State Cancer Council, serving for fifteen years, first in the period of its advisory role from 1952 to 1955 and then, from its statutory inauguration in the latter year, until his retirement in 1967. He was a member of the Interim Council of the New South Wales University of Technology (later to become the University of New South Wales) from 1947 to 1949 and then of its first Council, remaining a member for the following twenty years.

At the time of his appointment to the Challis Chair of History, Sir Stephen held the degrees of Master of Arts of the University of Melbourne and Doctor of Science in Economics of the London School of Economics. The degree of Doctor of Letters of the University of Melbourne was conferred on him in 1930. He was later the recipient of the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the Universities of Bristol, British Columbia and McGill, of Doctor of Civil Law from the University of Durham and of Doctor of Letters from the Universities of New England and Sydney.

He was made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in 1956 and was created a Knight Bachelor in 1965.

His foreign awards were those of Commander of the Danish Order of Danneborg, Commander of the Cedars of Lebanon and Commander of the Royal Greek Order of the Phoenix. These awards were indicative of a warm personal relationship existing between Sir Stephen and the diplomatic community, a relationship which resulted in a valuable broadening of public interest in the affairs of the University, both here and abroad.

S. H. Roberts was well known publicly in the late nineteen thirties and during World War II for his newspaper articles and radio broadcasts on the subject of contemporary history. His major published works were his "History of Australian Land Settlement, 1788-1920" (1924), "Population Problems of the Pacific" (1927), "History of French Colonial Policy" (1929), "The Squatting Age in Australia, 1835-47" (1935), and "The House that Hitler Built" (1937). His school texts, "History of Modern Europe" and "Modern British History", the second written in collaboration with the late C. H. Currey, made his name known to several generations of Australian school children.

During his term as Vice-Chancellor, Sir Stephen endeavoured to maintain contact with University people and organizations, other than the members of the academic staff with whom the routine of office kept him in touch, by attending functions such as those of trade unions and student organizations, and after his retirement he was present at special University functions whenever circumstances made this possible.