

Our Stories

Northcote Snippets – a series of historical glimpses into Northcote's past

Joan Rosanove (1897 - 1974) – Crocks & Crooks in Westgarth

Few women who have lived in Northcote have had as much influence on Australian women's rights, as much now as in the past, as the successful divorce lawyer, Joan Rosanove.



Joan Lazarus, initially from Ballarat, gained her Bachelor of Law in 1917 from Melbourne University where she met, and later married, fellow student Emmanuel (Mannie) Rosanove who was studying medicine. However, Joan's admission to the bar was delayed by the University for two years to allow more men to graduate. (The beginning of the discrimination against her.)

In 1919 she was the first female Jewess in Australia to be admitted to the Bar, at 21 years of age.

< Commemorative photograph, 1919.

A year later Joan married Mannie and they duly had three children. In 1923 the family moved to Westgarth, where Mannie had found a run-down General Medical Practice at 75 Westgarth St, Northcote. From September 1923, Joan worked purely as a barrister, even though she was also a qualified solicitor. This was unusual for a woman still in her twenties and Joan was the first woman in Victoria to do so.

Sadly, the male legal society in Melbourne denied chambers to a woman. Joan had little work, mostly on referral from her father's offices. In 1925 she became primarily a solicitor taking on mainly criminal and divorce cases, though to save money for her clients she also was acting as a barrister in court for these cases. Much of the work went through the Westgarth Medical Practice. The house was often filled with the 'crocks and crooks' - that is, the local criminals and, more particularly, women seeking divorce. The later was a complicated procedure legally at the time. Joan soon developed a name for successful divorces and the practice flourished. Years later it would be stated that she had handled some ten thousand cases during her career!

In 1933 after a shortened European trip that included Vienna, the Rosanove family moved to Toorak. A year later, author Katherine Susan Pritchard asked Joan to represent a Jewish Czech journalist, Egon Kisch, who had come to Australia to lecture about world peace and the dangers of Hitler's fascism. Despite Joan's various successful courtroom manoeuvres the Commonwealth was not going to let Kisch land. Joan was adamant and a successful court ruling allowed him to land.

Kisch was about to leave the boat, when the captain (who had spoken to Government officials) flouted the ruling and prevented him from disembarking by removing the gangplank. In desperation Kisch jumped off the boat, breaking his leg as he landed on Station Pier. The gangplank was quickly lowered and he was dragged screaming back on board. No doctor was called for and the boat left soon after, steaming for Sydney.

Luckily the press was on hand to record this inhuman treatment. As a result of this fiasco, Kisch's life would be reported in the newspapers for many months!





< Report in *The Star*, Melbourne, 13 November 1934.

Joan wisely foresaw that this case was going to be drawn out and advised Pritchard to get Christian Jollie-Smith to take over the case in Sydney.

“Free Kisch!” was now the catchcry around Australia. The government, who wanted this man to depart the shores quietly, was stuck with public outcry. The case dragged on for some time. Coming to a conclusion with the now infamous Gaelic immigrant dictation test - Kisch was fluent in so many languages that he passed all the immigration dictation tests, except for the one in Gaelic! Inevitably Kisch was found guilty and was sentenced to six months hard labour and deportation.

After more legal procedures Kisch was finally freed on appeal to the High Court yet again.

After 1949, Joan practiced as a Barrister and continued to apply to be a Queen’s Counsel (QC). However this was denied to her until 1965, close to her retirement! She would in time be Victoria’s first female QC, and only the second one in Australia. It says much about our country in those years that at no time in her career was Joan awarded a judgeship, government honours or given a Royal Commission, which clearly should have been due.

Joan retired from legal practice in 1969 and passed away five years later in 1974.

One of Joan Rosanove’s greatest contributions, and legacies, began in the 1950s when she documented in great detail the complex divorce procedures in each state of Australia. However it would be twenty years before appropriate action was taken - only in 1975, the year after her death, would the *Family Law Act* be passed by the Commonwealth Government enacting most of the Rosanove recommendations, including abolishing ‘fault’, and making family divorce law uniform throughout Australia.

In 2000 the Joan Rosanove Chambers were opened at 550 Lonsdale St, the head office of the Victorian Bar. A fitting tribute. Melbourne University’s Law School prize for top female student is named in her honour.

Joan Rosanove 1949 >



Some Rosanove quotes: *“To be a lawyer, you must have the stamina of an ox, and a hide like a rhinoceros, and when they kick you in the teeth, you must look as if you hadn’t noticed it.”*

“I can never see why it is not considered the hallmark of success to have a brain like a woman.”

P. Michell, 2018

This is an edited version of a talk by Paul Michell; the full version, and other talks, can be found at <https://northcotehistory.weebly.com/3-northcote-women-pitt-rosanove--latham.html>