

Subject: LMM 25/05/2021 - Condolence Motion – Vera Deacon OAM – Freeman of the City

MOTION

That City of Newcastle:

1. Acknowledges with great sadness that Vera Deacon OAM, Freeman of the City of Newcastle, passed away aged 94 on Sunday, 16 May 2021;
2. Notes that in 2018, the City of Newcastle named Mrs Deacon a Freeman of the City of Newcastle for her contribution to Newcastle’s heritage, conservation and local history, as well as her commitment to progressive social and political movements;
3. Notes that in 2020, Vera received a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for her services to community history and to conservation;
4. Notes that in 2020 Vera received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Newcastle for her lifelong passion, commitment and tireless effort in the conservation of the region's history, her overarching social justice values, and for her important social and philanthropic contributions to the University of Newcastle and Hunter community.
5. Acknowledges Vera’s enduring commitment to social justice, environmentalism and Indigenous rights, as well her lifelong campaigning for the betterment of the living and working conditions of working class people;
6. Recognises that Vera Deacon OAM was an inspiration to so many Novocastrians, as trailblazer for women, who was always on the right side of history in the fight for equality and fairness for all;
7. Advises that a Memorial Service for Vera will be held on Thursday, 3 June 2021 at Pettigrew Family Funerals, Mayfield West and that in lieu of flowers Vera’s family asks to please consider a donation to *The Vera Deacon Regional History Fund* at the University of Newcastle.



BACKGROUND

Vera Deacon, remembered as "the voice of the Hunter River", dies aged 94

Anita Beaumont | Newcastle Herald

NO words were spoken as Vera Deacon quietly relished every bite of her favourite treats the day before she died.

Her friend, Gianni Di Gravio, visited her in hospital on Saturday after she suffered a fall at her Stockton home.

"I took her in a couple of her favourite cakes - a chocolate éclair and a lemon meringue," Mr Di Gravio said.

"She just ripped the lid off that box and gobbled them up. She was really enjoying them. She gave us a big hug and a kiss and was telling us these anecdotes about how her mother had told her not to be a big show off and had put her in her place.

"But nothing could keep that light down. She was just such a wonderful human being."

Mrs Deacon - who received an honorary doctorate from the University of Newcastle in 2020 - died on Sunday afternoon. She was 94.

The Newcastle writer, historian, environmentalist and philanthropist had become known as the "voice of the Hunter River".

She had been raised on the islands in the Hunter River estuary before it gave way to heavy industry, and she spent much of her life promoting and conserving the region's history, its culture, and environment.

She also advocated for women's rights, social justice issues, and Indigenous rights and education.

And while Mrs Deacon may have wished to stay out of the spotlight, her generosity, passion and enthusiasm for Newcastle, the Hunter and its history led her to be named a "Freewoman" of the City in 2019, and awarded an Order of Australia Medal in 2020.

I have planted trees on Kooragang wetlands, riding on the idea that if someone plants a tree, if they are fortunate, and look after it, it will live on long after them, and endure.

Vera Deacon, OAM, in December, 2020

Mr Di Gravio said he had come to know Mrs Deacon via the University of Newcastle's history archives.

"She would turn up dressed in this beautiful white dress, a lovely white flowing hat - she was always very glamorous. She looked like an actress. I always used to call her Scarlett O'Hara," he said. "She always made a big impression.

"When her husband died a few years later she decided to relocate from Sydney to Stockton, because she wanted to be closer to the Hunter River. She had a real connection with Newcastle, and the river especially."

The Vera Deacon Regional History Fund was named in her honour in 2008 after she philanthropically "outgunned" corporations in donation dollars to support the preservation of the region's history.

"She had started donating money to us to support various little projects," Mr Di Gravio said.



Writer, philanthropist, advocate: Vera Deacon OAM

"Then the donations just kept coming. Once we added it up, we realised she'd donated more than Coal & Allied at the time ... pretty good for a pensioner from Stockton. And it inspired others to donate what they could too. I think everyone that got to know her was really charmed by her stories and inspired by them, and I feel very grateful for having known her."

Marilla North - Mrs Deacon's close friend and biographer - said Vera had "started something amazing" at the University of Newcastle's "Cultural Collections" by encouraging others to contribute whatever they could to the cause.

Her passing on Sunday had been "quick".

"Probably too quick for us," she said. "But she went without anguish or pain. She was happy. She'd eaten her favourite cakes from Mayfield, and a bowl of her favourite red grapes, before she went through the pearly gates."

Mrs Deacon is survived by two daughters - Daria Ball and Deb Harris, as well as her grandson, Ben Harris.

Ms North said her friend, who had lived through the Great Depression, was passionate about preserving history "so that the future knows about the past".

"She taught me to always be respectful of the women of the past and their contribution to the quality of life and work we have today, because we stand on their shoulders," she said.

"I think we stand on Vera's shoulders."



A young Vera Deacon, pictured top right, with her siblings

Mrs Deacon had a "deep, deep love" for the Hunter River and its islands - particularly Dempsey and Moscheto - also later known as "Mosquito" - islands, where she had spent most of her formative years.

"She was so angry when she came back home - after so many years away, to see how they had been 'reclaimed' - which meant they had disappeared," Ms North said.

"They had been turned over into a big industrial wasteland. Where, as a child, it had been a fertile place where her father had farmed oysters and grown all sorts of plants and vegetables.

"Her mission was to teach the people of Newcastle the lost memories of that beautiful place."

The "ruthless exploitation" of the Hunter River's islands and a desire to see the area remediated motivated Mrs Deacon to spend more than 25 years planting trees as part of the Kooragang

Wetland Rehabilitation Project. Peggy Svoboda, who ran the project, said Mrs Deacon would arrive at each of the monthly planting days wearing her signature bright pink pants and gum boots. She said Mrs Deacon had been "unfailingly kind and polite" - always with a gentle sense of humour.

"The Hunter River had no better friend," Ms Svoboda said. "She was very concerned that it was looked after.

"She was a volunteer with us from the very beginning.

"She loved going out and being part of the group, and she was like the Pied Piper - people would gather around her because she was just so open and so much fun."

Mrs Deacon's connection to the Hunter and its history ran deep, as did her desire to preserve its future.

As she told the Newcastle Herald in December 2020, she used to row her boat to work during the war.

"I'd row towards the steelworks and up to Ingall Street, get on my bicycle, and ride up into Mayfield where I had a job," Mrs Deacon said. "We loved the river, and we loved the islands, and I saw a lot of the pollution of the river. It was not only me that it upset. It upset a lot of people, because they were just using the river as a sewer.

"I think people should care about their local environment. I have planted trees on Kooragang wetlands, riding on the idea that if someone plants a tree, if they are fortunate, and look after it, it will live on long after them, and endure."

Mrs Deacon had lived through the Great Depression.

For a time, her family lived in the Mayfield West unemployment camp.

Her experiences, her observations, and her empathetic nature had motivated her to become an advocate for those less fortunate.

She was an inspiration to many.

Newcastle lord mayor Nuatali Nelmes, who named Mrs Deacon a "freewoman" of the city in 2019, said she had been a trailblazer for women and always on the right side of history in the fight for equality and fairness for all.

"She made Newcastle a more egalitarian place to be," she said. "While she was gentle and considered in all that she did, she used her immense intellect and ability to organise and join people together to fight for the oppressed, always.

"Vera's passion for our local Novocastrian history and our rich heritage was infectious, and I remain inspired by her unwavering progressive values and her ability to help others see the importance of weaving the stories of our past into the fabric of our society."



INSPIRATION: Vera Deacon, who died on Sunday, was a passionate historian and environmentalist with a deep love of the Hunter River. Picture: Marina Neil

Vera Deacon given City's highest honour

25 Sep 2019

Writer, philanthropist and passionate historian Vera Deacon has been named a Freeman of the City in recognition of her contribution to Newcastle's heritage, conservation and local history at a special ceremony at City Hall today.

Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes said Vera was a well-deserved recipient who would join an esteemed list of 13 other Novocastrians to be awarded the City's highest honour.

"The City of Newcastle deeply appreciates Vera's immense contribution to the ongoing preservation and interpretation of our rich local history," the Lord Mayor said.

"Steadfastly involved in progressive social and political movements, Vera is a trailblazer for women and has a keen sense of social justice and equality.

"We thank Vera for her many contributions to our community and know that while she may shy away from being singled out in this way, there are none more deserving of this wonderful honour."

Vera was born in Mayfield and raised on two of the Newcastle's original estuary islands on the Hunter River – Dempsey Island and Mosquito Island (also known as Moscheto).



During her childhood, she developed a deep and enduring connection with the waterway that continues to this day through her conservation and literary works.

After spending most of her married life in Sydney Vera returned to Newcastle in 1997 following the death of her husband Stanley.

Moving to Stockton where she could remain close to her beloved Hunter River, she joined the local historical society and began to piece together the history of the estuary islands, sharing the fruits of her research and the memories of other former residents in a series of award-winning stories.

She has dedicated countless hours to restoring the health of the estuary, volunteering as part of the Kooragang wetlands rehabilitation project on Ash Island.

Preserving the city's history and heritage continues to drive the Stockton resident, who has made regular donations to the University of Newcastle's Cultural Collections during the past 18 years.

The Vera Deacon Regional History Fund was set up by the university and named in her honour to recognise and build on her generosity, with donations, including Vera's, used to collect, document and digitise regional history archives.

"Through her generosity and passion, Vera has ensured that current and future generations of Novocastrians will be able to access the records and accounts of those who have come before them," the Lord Mayor said.

“The stories of our past play an important role in weaving the fabric of our society, both now and in the years to come.

“Newcastle’s stories will continue to be remembered and passed on, thanks in part to the Vera Deacon Regional History Fund and the altruism of its namesake.”



Vera Deacon addressing a public gathering in the Domain, Sydney in 1956

Breaking Bread: Vera Deacon, Stockton resident, historian and author

Scott Bevan | Newcastle Herald | 16 June 2018

Vera Deacon doesn't want a fuss made over her.

The 91-year-old has been reticent about doing this interview, because she doesn't like to be "big-noted".

She chooses a no-fuss restaurant in her home suburb, L&J Dining on Mitchell, at Stockton Bowling Club. Vera even declines a glass of wine with her \$8.90 lunch special, a generous serve of chicken and rice.

Yet, despite her protests, people want to make a fuss over Vera.

As Lawrence Tan, the restaurant owner, says after warmly greeting her, everyone knows Vera in Stockton.

Vera Deacon is known and lauded beyond this peninsula. At the university, a fund for preserving regional history archives is named after her.

She is cherished for her work with the Kooragang wetlands rehabilitation project. She is loved for her support of local cultural activities, particularly writing.

And her Novocastrian pride is infectious.



Vera Deacon on the Stockton breakwall in 2017. Picture: Simone De Peak

“It is very nice to be praised and all that sort of thing,” Vera says, as we sit in the bowling club restaurant, with its stunning views to the breakwater and along the great curve of Stockton Bight.

“But you sort of feel uncomfortable with it.”

Vera must spend a lot of time feeling uncomfortable.

So, Vera, for your own comfort, stop reading here. The rest of you, read on to learn a little more about the eminently praiseworthy Vera Deacon.

SHE may face the sea while we dine, but Vera Deacon is a child of the Hunter River. Vera was born in July 1926 in Mayfield. When she was on the way, her father, Norman Pember prophesied, “We’ll have a curly haired girl, and we’ll call her Vera”.

Norman Pember’s prediction was also a lament. When he was just eight, Norman had been made a ward of the state, and he and his sister, Vera, were separated. He never saw her again. But for the rest of his days, Norman kept searching for his sister.

“I’m named for her,” explains Vera.

Norman Pember was working at the BHP steelworks when he met Ellen Meehan. She’d grown up by the Hunter River’s upper reaches, on the enormous Belltrees farming property: “I always say when Mum and Dad married, the Upper Hunter married the Lower Hunter.”

When Vera was two, the Pembers moved to Dempsey Island, one of a clump of islands in the Hunter River estuary. Geographically, it was not far from Mayfield; just across the river. But in atmosphere, it felt like another world, especially to a small child. She could see across to the steelworks, where her Dad had worked until he was injured, which is why they were now living among fishermen and small-scale farmers on Dempsey Island.

“It was very lonely,” Vera recalls. Although she was no longer alone; she had a little brother, Ronnie. He toddled along behind his sister, and they would sit in their dad’s boat. In 1931, Ronnie died of meningitis.

He was aged three.

“I remember it so well,” says Vera. “I remember his white coffin.”

Soon after, the Pembers feared they would lose their oldest child as well. Vera had contracted typhoid fever.

When she was released from Royal Newcastle Hospital after two months, the five-year-old returned to a new home on neighbouring Mosquito Island. Norman had demanded the move: “Dad had said, ‘The house is jinxed. We’ve lost Ronnie, we’ve nearly lost Vera. We got to get out of this house.’”

As the Great Depression deepened in the early 1930s, the family returned “to the mainland, as we called it”, so Norman Pember could search for work. The family ended up living in unemployed people’s camps, including one in Mayfield West.

That make-do existence forged Vera Deacon's sense of social justice. Returning to the camp from school, she and her younger brother, Norman, would sometimes be attacked by other children, who called them "dirty little camp kids". Vera and her brother would hide from their attackers, "but I felt very ashamed ... I had this sense of being a coward". She told her father, who advised her to fight like a threshing machine. And she did: "I turned and I fought back. And I was never frightened again after that. I asserted myself."

The family, which would grow to six children, returned to Mosquito Island in 1939. The teenage Vera Pember fell in love with island life: "It was marvellous for us. We were away from the critical eyes of suburbia."

From her father, she learnt how to grow vegetables. She rowed a small boat to other islands and across to Mayfield and back.

And with each little voyage, she felt more and more connected to the river. Vera came to see the river as her "second mother", a protector, a food provider, and an educator.

The river, in all its moods, taught her resilience, gave her strength, and invested her with a love for the environment and an appreciation of its fragility.

One threat to the river lay on the opposite bank. She remembers being with her father one day when he cut open a fish, "and it was full of tar. He looked across and shook his fist at the works and said, 'They're killing the river'."

After the Second World War, the demands of industry reached across the river. Vera's beloved islands changed forever, as they were joined and buried by a massive land reclamation project. The Kooragang industrial precinct was created, but Vera Deacon's past was all but destroyed.

"I lament it, because I feel what was done to the estuary and the islands was definitely a crime against nature," she says, recounting the first time she drove with her father over the Tourle Street bridge and onto territory no longer familiar to her. "It was like going along a moonscape, it was dreadful."

In recent years, Vera Deacon has done her bit to restore how she remembers the estuary. She has been one of the hundreds of volunteers helping rehabilitate the wetlands on Ash Island.

"It's to inspire people that if we do the right thing by nature, we can rehabilitate her, we can restore her. And you just have to go up there and see the bushland, have a picnic; it's beautiful." As a young woman, Vera had left the islands before they were subsumed.

In 1944, she had accompanied her father to a meeting in Mayfield. The 17-year-old was impressed a woman was chairing the meeting. Then a man stood up and "gave this wonderful speech about ending the war and building the peace. It was very inspiring".

The meeting was organised by the Communist Party of Australia. Vera was mesmerised. What the teenager heard tallied with what she thought and had experienced in life. She joined the party that night and remained a member until it was dissolved in 1991. What remains undimmed is her belief in socialism as a means of creating a fairer world.

"I still believe in the historical necessity of it," she asserts. "I mean, look what's happening here with the banks.

“No one will ever convince me it’s right to have homeless people, that it’s right for people to pay themselves millions of dollars. You can’t eat all that money. How many houses do you need? How many cars?”

“My father always believed in sharing the wealth. You can’t serve two masters. You’re either on the side of the poor or the side of the rich. So I’m on the side of the less privileged. It’s right!”



Vera Deacon. Picture: Marina Neil

That night in 1944, Vera not only joined the Communist Party, she met her future husband. The man who spoke was Stanley Deacon, the party’s district secretary.

At first, the relationship was strictly business; Vera went to work in the party’s Newcastle office. But she knew this man, who was 20 years older than Vera, was right for her; admiration grew into love. Stan believed in gender equality, which made him refreshingly different in Vera’s eyes. “There was that ethos then – ‘Marry a woman and keep her barefoot and pregnant’ – it was a very common thing,” she recalls.

Vera and Stan married in 1946. He left the party office to seek work but had difficulty because of his politics. So they moved to Sydney, where Stan worked on trams then buses and Vera mostly in a post office job, and both were busy raising two daughters, Daria and Deborah.

Interest in the Deacons’ politics had followed them to Sydney. As Vera discovered many years later, ASIO kept files on both of them.

“It amazed me,” she says. “A lot of useless detail, you think they were wasting taxpayers’ money – ‘Mrs Deacon types at night’. That’s a criminal act?! I was the secretary of the local P&C!”



Vera Deacon was also involved in a realist writers' group and magazine, and she was on the committee of the Australasian Book Society, publishing works by local authors.

"We felt we had to do what we could to keep Australian literary traditions going," she explains. In 1993, Stanley Deacon died – "We had a wonderful marriage. We were married 46 years, five months and 10 days".

After a few years, Vera decided to return home, or as close as she could be to it. She moved to Stockton in 1997.

"It's on the river and the harbour," she says. "Also we knew Stockton from the island days. Occasionally we'd row across, tie up and go over and have a swim at the beach."

Vera immersed herself in the past. She joined the local historical society and, inspired by her mother's urging years before, pieced together the estuary islands' history by researching archives and interviewing surviving former residents. She crafted her research into stories, which won writing awards and have been published.

Her love of local history, and her membership of a Newcastle booklovers' group, led Vera to the university's cultural collections. She befriended fellow bibliophile and giant of university life, Professor Godfrey Tanner.

When Professor Tanner died, Vera honoured him by making a donation towards the university's archives. The pensioner made another donation, then another.

She has been donating –and she won't say how much – for about 17 years, helping fund the conservation and digitisation of materials, so more people can learn about the Hunter's past. Her generosity prompted an initiative the uni called the Vera Deacon Regional History Fund.



Vera Deacon with University of Newcastle archivist Gianni Di Gravio in 2017. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

The title makes Vera wince: “I’ve helped, but don’t get it out of proportion! It’s a collective thing. “My money’s just a bit of oil to help it along. And what would I do with it? I make most of my own clothes, I’m not into flash cars or Paris model dresses.”

Vera Deacon tries to live by her father’s final words to her: “Don’t be greedy, do good and keep an eye on the river.”

Her eyes and heart remain on the river.

“I still look at the river every morning when I go outside,” she says.

“I look down the street and I can see it rippling by and I feel contented and happy. Because it’s my river, my lifeblood. It’s the saltwater in my veins. It’s still our mother.”