

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4840

Arndt, Ruth

(1915 - 2001)

Born	20 March, 1915, Cuxhaven Germany
Died	20 March, 2001, Canberra Australian Capital Territory
Occupation	Community worker, Teacher

Summary

Ruth Arndt was a qualified social worker who, while unable to practise her profession because her British qualifications were not recognised in Australia, was a tireless advocate and community worker in Canberra, particularly for migrants and foreign students. She taught English to many new arrivals, taught German and Economics at both Canberra Boys' and Girls' Grammar Schools and worked as a research officer in the Department of External Affairs. She also served on the Australian National University Council, the Governing Body of Bruce Hall and was president of the Ladies Drawing Room at University House.

Details

Ruth Emma Auguste Strohsahl was born in Cuxhaven in northwest Germany on 20 March 1915. Her parents were both involved in politics – her mother was leader of the Social Democratic faction in the city council and her father was editor of the Social Democratic newspaper. As a teenager in Nazi Germany she demonstrated the courage and independence she displayed in later life: she refused to give the Nazi salute at school and failed her final examination after writing an essay criticising Nazi economic policy. In 1935 she went to live in England and worked as an au pair then obtained a bursary to enter Edinburgh University. With the assistance of the Warden of Masson Hall, Marjory Rackstraw, she was awarded a scholarship to London University's School of Economics where she studied sociology and obtained an Honours degree. She also met Heinz Arndt (later Professor) and they were married on 12 July 1941.

The Arndts came to Australia in 1947 when Heinz accepted a position as a senior lecturer in Sydney University's Economics Department. Demonstrating her adventurous and independent attitude, when Heinz was unable to get leave from his position in 1949, Ruth returned to Germany to see her parents, whom she had not seen since 1939, travelling by ship with her two young sons, Chris and Nick. She stayed on in England to give birth to her daughter Bettina. She then returned by ship with the three children arriving in Sydney nine months after she had set out.

In 1951, the family moved to Canberra when Professor 'Joe' Burton, Principal of the Canberra University College, offered Heinz the Chair in Economics. Heinz's position transferred to the Australian National University in 1960 and in 1963 he was appointed Head of the Department of Economics in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University.

Ruth used her skills and experience as a social worker to good effect in Canberra, teaching English to European migrants in evening and afternoon classes in her own home and assisting many in their dealings with government bureaucracy and the health system. She was invited to become a member of the Good Neighbour Council which assisted migrants' assimilation into the Australian way of life. However she was never able to practise her profession as a social worker as her British qualifications were not recognised in Australia.

When her children were young, Ruth took an active interest in fundraising for the North Ainslie pre-school, chairing the parents and citizen's committee. She worked as a research assistant at the Australian National University interviewing parents of pre-school children for the psychologist Pat Petony and reading and summarising articles in German-language newspapers published in Australia for the Department of Demography.

She taught German and Economics at the Canberra Boys' and Girls' Grammar Schools and was for fifteen years a research officer in the Department of External Affairs, briefing Australian diplomats on the preparation of economic reports. Invariably, Ruth's and Heinz's work spilled over into their home life, with foreign students and foreign affairs cadets joining the many migrants and refugees whom they assisted.

From 1969 to 1975 she was a member, elected by Convocation, of the ANU Council, one of only three women. She was on the Governing Board of the University's residential college, Bruce Hall, from 1970 to 1975 and was also a Tutor (Fellow) there. She was president of the Ladies Drawing Room at University House from 1980 to 1982, following her friend, Molly Huxley.

Ruth died on 20 March 2001, her 86th birthday, from medical complications after a fall. She was survived by Heinz (her husband of 60 years who died the following year), her three children and nine grandchildren.

Published resources

Book

Arndt's story: The life of an Australian economist, Coleman, Peter; Cornish, Selwyn; Drake, Peter and Arndt, Bettina, 2007

Newspaper Article

Obituary. Profound Contributor to ANU Community, Faunce, Marcus, 2001, http://oa.anu.edu.au/uploads/obituaries/35/arndt_ruth_obit_2001.pdf

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Australian National University Archives

Arndt, H W

Governing Body of Bruce Hall

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

Papers of Heinz Wolfgang Arndt, 1933-2002 [manuscript]

Author Details

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Digital resources



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