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# *Jill Ker Conway, 83, Feminist Author and Smith President, Dies*

By Neil Genzlinger

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Growing up on a giant sheep ranch in the remote grasslands of Australia can shape a young girl's whole life.

“In a labor-scarce society with a shortage of human energy, there is no room for social conventions about women's work,” Jill Ker Conway, who grew up in just such a place, once noted. “The work had to be done. It never crossed anyone's mind that you didn't work up to your competence.”

By the time she made that observation, in 1975 and thousands of miles from her birthplace, Dr. Conway had proved the point. She had just become the first woman to be named president of Smith College, the prestigious women's institution in Northampton, Mass.

And she was still early in a career filled with accomplishments. After a decade leading Smith, she wrote three acclaimed memoirs, among other books, and championed feminist causes and ideas. In 2013 she was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama.

Dr. Conway died on Friday at her home in Boston, Smith College announced. She was 83. No cause was given.

Kathleen McCartney, Smith's current president, said in a telephone interview that she was struck not only by what Dr. Conway did for the college, but also by her multiple roles as feminist, author, scholar and woman of influence on the boards of companies like Nike and nonprofits like the Kellogg Foundation.

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“One of the things I really like about Jill's life as a model,” Dr. McCartney said, “is that she had different chapters in it.”

Jill Kathryn Ker was born on Oct. 9, 1934, in Hillston, New South Wales, in southeastern Australia, and grew up in nearby Coorain, where her parents, William and Evelyn A'Dames Ker, had a 32,000-acre sheep ranch. Her father died when she was 10, and at 12 Jill was sent to boarding school.

She later enrolled at the University of Sydney and received a history degree in 1958. In 1960 she made the crucial decision to leave Australia for graduate school in the United States.

“I’d arrived at the choice by exhausting all the possibilities of interesting careers in Australia,” Dr. Conway wrote in “True North” (1994), her second memoir, “discovering, one by one, that they were not open to women.”

She enrolled at Radcliffe College and shared a house for a time with other women from overseas who were doing graduate work. They came to call her Mother Superior for her skill at negotiating with the landlord and her general organizational abilities.

While working toward her Ph.D., which she received at Harvard in 1969, she served as a teaching fellow, working for a Harvard professor named John Conway. They married in 1962.

Her feminist convictions extended to the marriage.

“Young women are trained to think they should marry someone who is a great romantic love,” Dr. Conway told The Globe and Mail of Canada in 2002. “You should really marry someone who respects your working self and creative ability and wants to enter into a relationship where each supports the other. And that’s not the romantic story.”

The couple moved to Canada in 1964, and she took a teaching post at the University of Toronto. She became a dean in 1971 and a vice president in 1973.



President Barack Obama presenting the National Humanities Medal to Dr. Conway at the White House in 2013. Pete Marovich/Getty Images

Dr. Conway took over the Smith presidency at a time when the college was facing complaints that women were being discriminated against in faculty hiring and promotions. It was also a period when the very idea of a college for women was being questioned and Smith was trying to transform itself into something less antiquated and more competitive.

Susan C. Bourque, who was a professor of government at Smith at the time and later became provost, said Dr. Conway had a knack for handling the various constituencies involved in these issues — faculty members, students, alumnae, board members — perhaps influenced by her husband's background as a World War II veteran.

“I think Jill took from John's military experience a kind of tactical mind,” she said in a phone interview. “She thought of things as long-term campaigns rather than immediate vanquishing of a foe.”

Among the changes Dr. Conway oversaw was an upgrading of the college's sports teams and facilities — a change she led by example, not only by being the No. 1 fan at basketball games and other contests but also by personally pursuing physical fitness.

“If you wanted to see the president,” Dr. Bourque said, “you learned to get up early and meet her at the pool.”

Dr. Conway also understood that a woman's education can often be interrupted by marriage, childbirth or economic realities. At a time when many universities had not yet focused on nontraditional students, she led the development of an initiative that had been approved under her predecessor, the Ada Comstock Scholars Program (named for a Smith alumna) for students seeking to resume studies they had abandoned.

Dr. Conway left Smith in 1985 to devote time to writing. Her first memoir, "The Road From Coorain" (1989), which became a best seller, told of her life in Australia up to the point of her decision to leave. Fueling that decision, she wrote, was an episode in which she and two male friends applied for the Australian version of the foreign service; the men were accepted while she was not.

"It chilled me to realize that there was no way to earn my freedom through merit," she wrote. "It was an appalling prospect."

Verlyn Klinkenborg, reviewing "The Road From Coorain" in The New York Times, called it "the work of a writer who relentlessly tugs at the cultural fences around her until they collapse, leaving her solitary under an immense Australian sky, enlarged to herself at last."

The PBS program "Masterpiece Theater" used the book as the basis for a film in 2002.

"True North" picked up Dr. Conway's story where the first book had left off and took it up to her move from Toronto to Smith. Then, in 2001, came "A Woman's Education."

"She writes knowledgeably about all disciplines as a good college president should," William R. Everdell wrote in his review in The Times, "but never misses what women's scholarship has done, including reshaping entire fields like anthropology and economics."

John Conway died in 1995. She leaves no immediate survivors.

After leaving Smith, Dr. Conway was a visiting professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Program on Science, Technology and Society. Besides her memoirs, her books include "When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography" (1998), which explores the ways memoirs by men and by women differ.

She was the editor of several books as well, including "Written by Herself: Autobiographies of American Women" (1992) and "In Her Own Words: Women's Memoirs From Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States" (1999).

Although much of Dr. Conway's writing focused on women, she knew that limited definitions and opportunities affect everyone.

“Sex-role stereotyping has hurt men as much as women,” she told The Boston Globe in 1975. “For me, liberation means the full range of human traits can be displayed by either men or women without social penalties.”

***Correction: June 6, 2018***

*An earlier version of this obituary referred imprecisely to the Ada Comstock Scholars Program at Smith College. While Dr. Smith was instrumental in the program’s development, she did not begin it; it had been approved under her predecessor as president, Thomas Mendenhall.*

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