

Obituary - The Hon C.L.D. Meares AC CMG QC

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OBITUARY

HON C L D MEARES AC CMG QC

The death occurred on 5 August 1994 in Sydney of one of the most striking figures of the Australian legal scene. Leycester Meares, a former Judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, was a man unstinting in his contributions to Australian public life and unfailing in his many acts of personal kindness to his family, friends and people in need.

Born in 1909 to a well known legal, accounting and grazing family, and admitted to the New South Wales Bar in 1932, Leycester Meares saw war service in the AIF during the Second World War. In the post-War period he built a large practice as a barrister, mainly in common law and commercial cases. He was a redoubtable cross-examiner with a high sense of drama and theatre in his courtroom style. He had no great interest in academic law, but was a superb advocate. He rewarded instructing articled clerks, solicitors and even good junior counsel with boiled lollies, produced from a large bottle kept in his desk under lock and key against marauding unworthies. A measure of the regard in which he was held in the practising profession was his election as President of the New South Wales Bar Association in 1961 and the first President of the Australian Bar Association in 1963. He was also an office-bearer in the Medico-Legal Society, the University Club, and many such bodies.

He never married. But he had a large circle of family, friends and devotees, none of them more loyal than his long-time Judge's Associate, Ruth Kerr.

As a Judge of the New South Wales Supreme Court, Leycester Meares served first in an acting capacity and then by a full time appointment between 1969 and 1979. He sat mainly in common law. He later took charge of the Commercial List of the Supreme Court where his practical commonsense and long experience in trials of commercial disputes were much in evidence, as was his stern integrity leavened by his sense of humour.

Meares' abiding passion for law reform led him to become Chairman of the New South Wales Law Reform Commission - a post which he held from 1972 to 1976. During this time he promoted greater cooperation between law reform bodies throughout Australia.

In 1973 Justice Meares was appointed by the Whitlam Government to the National Compensation Rehabilitation Inquiry under Sir Owen Woodhouse of New Zealand. The report of that inquiry proposed a major change to Australia's national compensation law, the attainment of which was frustrated by the dismissal of the government in November 1975 by Meares' long-time friend, the Governor-General Sir John Kerr. In the ensuing isolation of Kerr, Meares stuck to their friendship. He was not a fair weather acquaintance.

Following his retirement from the Bench, Meares served in many other national and state bodies, including as counsel before the Joint Committee on Public Accounts, as President of the Courts Martial Appeals Tribunal, as Chairman of the National Advisory Council for the Handicapped and as Chairman of the Australian Vietnam War Veterans Trust. His earnings from these positions he donated to charity. He was an indefatigable worker for good causes: puckish in his humour, kindly to new members of the legal profession and a model of grace under fire - sterling attributes in a barrister and law reformer. It was in these capacities that he will be best remembered in the legal profession of Australia to which he contributed so much over a long life of service. He was 85 years old when he died.

In his private life Leycester Meares he was a great raconteur. He had a nickname (often rude) for everyone. He ran a country property near Mudgee and

played sports of all kinds with furious and seemingly dare-devil indifference to risks. He was often sent off the hockey field - even in years when most retired judges had settled down to genteel armchair pursuits. He never quite managed to show the same dispassion on the hockey field as he invariably mustered in court. He was a great patron of the arts, assiduously buying new paintings. He could be seen every weekend going the rounds of the art galleries of Sydney. He regularly attended the major auction houses, either buying or selling paintings. He also was an habitu  of Lord Howe Island to which he made an annual pilgrimage. His visits began in the late 1930s, after which he spent every January on the island (excluding the war years); fishing, carousing and talking to the inhabitants. He knew, liked and became friends with all of them. When he attained the age of 80, the entire island gave him an enormous party - an event which his friends in Sydney later duplicated although reportedly without quite the same panache.

Leycester Meares was appointed Queen's Counsel in 1954. He was awarded the CMG in 1978. In 1985, he was honoured by being appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia, the nation's highest civil decoration.

MICHAEL KIRBY and R P MEAGHER