HELEN ROSENMAN
1921–2009

LINDA, STEPHEN AND SARA ROSENMAN

Helen Lawry Rosenman, translator of the journals of Dumont d’Urville, died on 5 January 2009, a few days short of her 88th birthday.

Born Helen Lawry Firkin on 5 January 1921 and brought up in Newcastle, she attended Newcastle Girls’ High School and finished dux in her final year. Supported and mentored by her aunt and godmother Dr Helen Braye, her namesake and one of the University of Sydney’s early female medical graduates, she entered the University of Sydney and Women’s College in the 1930s when most other girls—particularly those from the country—did not complete high school. Graduating with a BA in 1942 and with the war in progress, she joined the Ministry of Munitions as a clerk. In 1941 she met a Polish refugee doctor, David Rosenman who, having been required to requalify in Australia, was undertaking his medical residency at Wallsend Hospital. Soon after marrying in December 1943, he was posted to the Northern Territory as
a captain in the Australian Army Medical Corps. When he returned to Sydney in 1945 and set up medical practice in Summer Hill, she gave up work, reared three children and supported her husband as the wife of a busy suburban GP.

In 1965, having started to relearn French, she enrolled at Sydney University as an ‘older student’, a curiosity to the lecturers and young students as well as a role model—and an embarrassment—to her eldest daughter who started at Sydney University the following year. In 1967 she graduated with First Class Honours and then decided to pursue a Masters degree in French literature. She spent six months in Paris in 1968 researching the works of the French author Henry de Montherlant. Gathering up her courage she wrote to him asking to meet. She finally received an invitation to a meeting for the day after she was scheduled to leave to go back to Australia and, to her eternal regret, she gave up the opportunity to meet him in favour of returning home. On her return to Australia she joined the academic staff of Macquarie University as a tutor in French with Angus Martin as her thesis supervisor and was awarded her Masters degree in 1972.

In the early 1980s she became intrigued by the history of the French explorers in the Pacific, having been asked by a friend and distant relative, Stephen Murray-Smith, to translate relevant parts of the journals of French explorers, including Dumont d’Urville, for a history he was writing on Bass Strait. She became fascinated by the accounts of the two great voyages of exploration to the Pacific and the Antarctic in 1826–1929 and 1837–40 respectively, which were written (and led) by Captain, later Rear Admiral, Dumont d’Urville of the French navy and hitherto untranslated into English. In 1988 her translation (the research for which was partly funded by an ARC grant) was published in two handsome volumes by Melbourne University Press and, later, the University Press of Hawaii, and subsidised by the French oil company Total as their contribution to Australia’s bicentenary. The translation was flatteringly reviewed by leading Pacific historians and sold well, leading MUP to commission an abridged account of the voyages in one volume for their soft covered classics. This was published in 1992 and again favourably reviewed.

Having retired from teaching at Macquarie University, she continued to give lectures on the role of the French in the opening of the Pacific, hoping in some small way to make a dent in the Anglocentric Australian view of the history of Pacific exploration. She was always at pains to reinforce that New Zealanders were much more aware of the role of the French in their history,
recounting how Australia and New Zealand might have been French colonies, that the English might never have settled here, and that Australians would then have all spoken French, something she would have heartily approved of. Tall, elegant and a gifted public speaker, she was in demand by a wide range of groups from the RAN retired officers’ club to U3A for talks on eighteenth century French explorers with a series entitled ‘We could have been French’.

She was also a supporter of many societies and causes including the Alliance Française, the University of Sydney Women Graduates’ Association and was actively involved in the establishment of the Lapérouse Museum in Sydney.

Over the last ten years of her life she slowly succumbed to dementia but in many ways her essential personality remained: her cheerfulness, her warmth, her elegance and her love of music. Her husband David, who had wholeheartedly supported her work on her ‘other man’ (as she used to call Dumont d’Urville), survived her by six months, dying in June 2009. She is survived by her brother Caleb and sister Mary, three children, Linda, Stephen and Sara, as well as five granddaughters, two grandsons and one great granddaughter who bears her name.

Melbourne, Sydney, Rome