



AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

STUDY GUIDE

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DAME RACHEL CLELAND

SERIES 8

(1906-2002) Liberal Party Matriarch
and Conservationist

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 8) produced by the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories - of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Dame Rachel Cleland was born into a life of wealth and privilege among the elite of Perth in the first decade of the 20th century. She well remembers her aunt's plush Edwardian style household: a magnificent home staffed with a cook,

two housemaids, two gardeners and a chauffeur. As a child she watched from the top of the house's giant stairway as guests in black tie and long evening dresses arrived to enjoy the sumptuous parties of the period.

Interviewed at 94, she looks back over a

At 93 she opposed other conservatives by joining environmentalists protesting the destruction of Western Australian forests.

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ABOVE: DAME RACHEL CLELAND IN 2001





life spanning the greater part of a century of extraordinary change. She recalls both world wars, learning the Charleston during the Jazz Age, the heartbreak of the Great Depression and the nation-building excitement of the post-war boom.

As with many women of her generation, Dame Rachel was forced to mould her ambition around the demands of others. Although her mother and aunt whose splendid house she so enjoyed were early feminists, their theories did not extend to their daughter and niece. Dame Rachel's early hopes of becoming an architect were rejected outright. Without consultation she was told to be a kindergarten teacher. Accepting the parental authority of the time, she grew to love it. In 1928 when she married her lifelong husband Don, she willingly accepted that he was already married to his career and that her role would be one of supporting him.

Unresentful, Dame Rachel says she and her husband were a team and that he shared his work openly with her. In the 1940s, she worked with Don and Sir Robert Menzies in founding the Liberal Party. They remained in public life, experiencing Australia's final period as a colonial authority when Don served as the Administrator of New Guinea from 1952 to 1966. Dame Rachel returned to Perth after her husband's death and continued an active involvement in local Liberal politics.

For someone who often accepted the traditional path in life, Dame Rachel is independently minded when she chooses. At 93 she opposed other conservatives by joining environmentalists protesting the destruction of Western Australian forests. She

is also outspoken on the need for a more progressive brand of 'liberalism' in the party of which she was a founding member.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Australian Biography: Dame Rachel Cleland will have interest and relevance for students from middle to senior secondary levels studying English, Modern History, Politics, Citizenship and Society Life Skills, Society and Culture and Media Studies.

THE PLACE OF BIOGRAPHY IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

An article by Associate Professor Don Garden, History Department, University of Melbourne, is available from the Film Australia website. Designed as a reference for teachers and other educationalists, it provides a background about biography and autobiography as well as discussion of pedagogical approaches.

Consider also:

*History...is an inquiry which tries to narrate, reconstruct and interpret past human experiences.*¹

*Oral History is information about the past collected by interviewing people about their lives. It is an important source of information for family and personal history. Oral History interviews are pieces of historical evidence of a person's past experience or of events in their lives. It can be used with other pieces of evidence such as photographs and entries from diaries.*²

BEFORE WATCHING

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE HISTORY OF WOMEN IN 20TH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

Women have been largely ignored within the pages of written history. Dame Rachel Cleland's life experiences could easily have been ignored in another era, as she was married to a successful and charismatic man who may well have overshadowed her contributions. Through this programme, we are now presented with an opportunity to hear her voice—and share in her story about

how she succeeded in making her own impact alongside her husband.

- 1 What do you think led to the increasing interest in the documentation of women's history in Australia in the 1970s?
- 2 Do you think it is important to tell women's history? Why/why not?
- 3 What types of information do you think should be gathered about women's lives?

To find out more about women in 20th century Australia:

VISIT THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES:

http://www.aec.gov.au/elections/australian_electoral_history/milestone.htm (Milestones for women in Australian politics)
<http://www.powerof100.com.au/> (Western Australia's Women's Roll of Honour)
<http://members.optushome.com.au/lenorefrost/women.html> (links to Australian women's sites)

VIEW THESE VIDEOS:

1. Sue Fabian, Morag Loh, *Australian women's heritage, 1901-1945* [videorecording], Melbourne : Video Classroom for Equality Press, c1986
2. Sue Fabian, Morag Loh, *Australian women's heritage, 1945-1986* [videorecording] / Imprint Melbourne : Video Classroom for Equality Press, c1986

READ THESE BOOKS:

1. Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon, *Gentle invaders: Australian women at work 1788 – 1974*. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1975
2. Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: origins of women's education in nineteenth-century Australia*. Melbourne University Press, 1996
3. Ann Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Penguin, 2002
4. Beverley Kingston, *My Wife, My Daughter and Poore Mary Ann: Women and Work in Australia*. Melbourne, Nelson, 1975
5. Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda*. UNSW Press, 1999

DAME RACHEL CLELAND IN PUBLIC LIFE

Born in Perth, author and recognized

authority on Papua New Guinea, where she lived for over 30 years. The Papua-New Guinea Government called for her investiture as a Dame of the British Empire due to her tireless work helping women of the struggling Third World nation. She has also been awarded the Commander of the British Empire, Member of the British Empire and was President of the Girl Guides Association, Australian Red Cross and the Australian Pre-School Association (PNG).³

*The Liberal Party is mourning the loss of its matriarch Dame Rachel Cleland, 96. Dame Rachel died peacefully in her sleep in Brisbane... She was considered the matriarch of the Liberals because her husband Donald was instrumental in helping Robert Menzies set up the party...In recent years, Dame Rachel had become known for her opposition to the logging of old-growth forests...Dame Rachel was recently quoted on the forest issue as saying Robert Menzies would never have taken the same attitude as the present Liberals about logging.*⁴

READ THE FOLLOWING BOOK ABOUT WOMEN IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA:

Chilla Bulbeck, *Australian Women in Papua New Guinea: colonial passages 1920-1960*. Cambridge University Press, 1992

THE FORMATION OF THE LIBERAL PARTY

*In 1944, the Liberal Party of Australia was founded. [Its members] shared a common belief that Australians should have greater personal freedom and choice than that offered under Labor's post-war socialist plans. Robert Menzies had already served as Prime Minister of Australia (1939-40), but he believed that the non-Labor parties should unite to present a strong alternative government to the Australian people.*⁵

1. Discuss the importance of grass-roots politics to a political party machine
2. What were the original aims of the Liberal Party and what was its attraction to potential members in this era?
3. What was the nature of Donald Cleland's involvement in the Liberal Party?

For further background reading about the Liberal Party:

1. Liberal Party website <https://www.liberal.org.au/>
2. Graeme Starr, *Liberal Party of Australia: a documentary history*. Drummond/Heinemann, 1980
3. Dean Jaensch, *The Liberals*. Allen & Unwin, 1994

DONALD CLELAND, ADMINISTRATOR OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA (1953-67):

[As Administrator of Papua New Guinea] Cleland was pragmatic, balancing commercial, mission and government interests against what he thought was primary: the orderly development of the indigenous

people. Publicly, he measured success in terms of building roads, bridges and airstrips, the increase in government revenue and the expansion of the public service. He chaired the Legislative Council, his 'pride and joy', until 1964 and directed the introduction of the first House of Assembly elected by full adult franchise; he restructured the public service so that it would be dominated by Papua New Guineans, paid at a rate the country could afford; and he continued the elimination of discriminatory legislation, most obviously ending the liquor ban in 1962...he was knighted in 1961. Energetic, with broad interests and deft social skills, Rachel complemented his dour, sometimes gruff, manner, and eased contact with diverse people. She was to be appointed Dame



RACHEL CLELAND IN 1937

of the British Empire in 1981.⁶

1. What was Australia's relationship with Papua New Guinea at this time?
2. Why would Don Cleland's policies have been seen as being liberal?
3. What do you think this quotation shows us about the reporting of women in history?
4. Compare and contrast the above quote with the ones about Dame Rachel.

Further reading on Australia's administration of Papua New Guinea:

1. Ian Downs, *The Australian Trusteeship, Papua New Guinea, 1945-75* A.G.P.S., 1980
2. Ed: W. J. Hudson, *Australia and Papua New Guinea*, Sydney University Press, 1971

AFTER WATCHING

One insight the program reveals is that the environment in which Dame Rachel was raised had a profound effect on her belief system, goals and achievements for the rest of her life.

- What effect did the women of Dame Rachel's family have on her life?
- What effect did the Great Depression have on her life?
- Give examples of Dame Rachel's adaptability and discuss how she dealt with change.
- What effect did politics have on the outcomes of her life?
- Why do you think Dame Rachel believed that she could assist the cause of the Conservation Movement?
- What do you believe she could give to a younger group of political activists?

MEDIA STUDIES

Biography told through the method of oral history has certain narrative elements, revealing the motivation of characters and what they do with opportunity and time.

Certain stylistic elements are used by the filmmaker to enhance the narrative. They are: composition, framing, spatial relations, camera movement, lighting, editing techniques, narration, sound ef-

fects, music, archival photographs and film or tape.

- What role does the interviewer/narrator play in this program?
- What are the challenges of using narration in this manner?
- How has music been used?
- Discuss the use of archival stills and footage.

A biography also reveals a sequence of events and should achieve narrative unity.

- Discuss the style and pace of the editing. Do you think it distracted from or enhanced the narrative unity?
- Is closure achieved at the end of the narrative?
- Are issues resolved?
- Are questions answered?
- Were you drawn into the story?
- Which part of the story resonated with you?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Rachel Cleland, *Papua New Guinea Pathways To Independence: Story Of Official & Family Life In Papua New Guinea From 1951-1975*, Artlook Books, Perth, 1985

A warm, personal account of the lifestyle and customs of the people of Papua New Guinea combined with a detailed record of events leading to Independence. A politically important history which includes many references to ANGAU (Australian Military Administration of PNG).

Rachel Cleland, *Grass Roots to Independence and Beyond: the contribution by women to Papua New Guinea 1951-1991*, Dame Rachel Cleland, Claremont, WA, 1996

An insight into the life and times of women in a developing territory. Case studies of various women's NGOs including the Girl Guides and the YWCA. Also profiles individual women and the pioneering work they have done in various fields.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mark Anderson & Paul Ashton, *Focus on Australian History*. MacMillan Education Australia, 1994, p. 2
- ² Mark Anderson & Paul Ashton, *Focus*

on *Australian History*. MacMillan Education Australia, 1994.

- ³ <http://php.highway1.com.au/wpo/index.html> (The Western Australian Women's Roll of Honour website)
- ⁴ Selina Day: "Liberals mourn loss of Dame Rachel" Post Courier, April 19th, 2002.
- ⁵ <http://www.liberal.org.au/about/history.htm>
- ⁶ Ed: John Ritchie. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Vol. 13, 1940-1980, pp. 440-1.

Australian Biography: Dame Rachel Cleland

A Film Australia National Interest Program
 Director/Producer: Robin Hughes
 Executive Producer: Mark Hamlyn
 Duration: 26 minutes
 Year: 2001

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