

ARMITAGE, Audrey Mae (1925 – 2014) OBITUARY

by Anne French



Audrey Armitage (l) with her sister Pamela in Newcastle in the late 1940s.

Audrey was born in Murwillumbah, NSW, in 1925. Her father, Bertie Armitage, was a stonemason and was originally from Muswellbrook. When Audrey was still a baby the family moved back to Muswellbrook and then in 1928 they moved to Scone. By that time there were three daughters in the family, Margaret (b. 1923), Audrey and Pamela (born 1928). A son, Warwick, was born in 1932.

Audrey attended Scone Public School for her primary education. She was a high spirited child and it appears she was often in trouble. Her grandmother, Rosetta Armitage, wrote in a letter to the family in 1936, when Audrey was almost 11,

“I’m glad the friendship between Audrey and her new teacher is mutual – that’s a great help making her attend to her behaviour....You know I’ve got a very soft spot in my heart for my wayward little grand daughter and feel sure she’ll make good some day”.

In the same letter, Rosetta mentioned Audrey’s flair for writing, an early sign of her future career in journalism. She wrote, “I was amused at Audrey’s composition and I’m pleased you sent it to me.”

Audrey attended Newcastle Girls’ High School from 1938 to 1942. During this time she boarded during the week with a relative in the Newcastle suburb of Merewether and would have travelled home to Scone most weekends by train. Her sisters and brother also completed their secondary schooling in Newcastle.

When she was 17, Audrey saw a film called “Foreign Correspondent”. The hero worked in Paris and according to Audrey he found “adventure, excitement, spies and romance and even an expense account, as a bigtime newspaperman”. From that moment on, Audrey decided that journalism would be the career for her. She later wrote that when she announced this to her family her mother “drew herself up to her full 5 feet 3 (inches) and said firmly, ‘Journalism is no life for a lady.’” So Audrey enrolled in an Arts degree at the then New England University College (later the University of New England) in Armidale. She completed her degree and a teaching qualification but her heart was

never in teaching. She taught at Singleton for less than a year before finding a position in ABC Radio, Newcastle. From there she quickly moved into print journalism at the *Newcastle Sun*.



Audrey with her father, Bertie Armitage, and brother, Warwick Armitage, in the late 1940s.

In 1951, with only a few years journalism experience under her belt, Audrey set sail for Europe. She arrived in Spain and then travelled pillion on a motorcycle with Jack Cahill, a fellow journalist from Newcastle, through Spain, the Riviera, Switzerland and up to Paris. There she landed a temporary job as a sub-editor with the *Parisian Continental Daily Mail*. She wrote to her family at the time that she was the very first woman sub-editor on the continent and in the UK for the *Daily Mail*. She later took a position at American Associated Press in London.

Once back in Australia, Audrey held positions as sub-editor and chief sub-editor for the *Melbourne Herald*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Mirror*. For many years she worked as chief sub-editor and travel editor for *Women's Day* and for a period was also an assistant editor of *Walkabout* magazine. Among the many famous people she interviewed were Sophia Loren and the Pope of the day.

The position on *Women's Day* was a perfect fit for Audrey's passion for travel and adventure. She visited many countries on assignment including Italy, Germany, Morocco, Iran, Israel, Cambodia, Indonesia, North America, Scandinavia, Nepal and India. Her most exciting assignment was possibly her trip to Angkor Wat in 1965, at a time when all journalists were banned from Cambodia. At the airport, she managed to convince a police chief to let her into the country, but she then spent the next few days under constant police surveillance. She did, however, manage to turn the experience into a wonderful article for *Women's Day*.

In the 1950s Audrey turned her hand to writing murder mystery paperbacks. This was in order to help pay off the loan which she had taken out to build a home at Collaroy Plateau in Sydney. From 1956 to 1958 she and her friend, Gloria Watkins, produced 30 paperbacks, almost one a month. They were fast-paced, racy novelettes, with titles such as "Drag me Down" and "The Lady's a Decoy". Audrey wrote under the pen name of K. T. McCall and her leading man was Johnny Buchanan. She said that when she once attempted to elevate the literary standard of her stories she was told by her publisher that if she couldn't write rubbish they would soon find someone who could. Audrey was paid 100 pounds for each paperback, which sold for 2/6 in newsagents.

Audrey had a razor sharp mind and was always interested in university studies. In 1948 she enrolled in a Master of Arts degree at the University of Sydney. In a letter to her family she described what happened,

“I submitted my thesis to the professor. Having only a pass degree I had to do an examination as well, which I never got around to.”

However, she enrolled again 14 years later and submitted a thesis on the influence of journalistic techniques on the modern novel. This time she sat the required exam which included a section on the English poet, Dame Edith Sitwell. Audrey claimed Dame Edith was the greatest woman of letters of the twentieth century and was over the moon when she had a private audience with her in 1963. This was also the year she graduated with her Masters degree, along side Bill Peach, Logie Award winning journalist.

Much later, when she was in her 70's, she considered enrolling in a PhD but unfortunately this didn't eventuate. However, she enrolled in several live-in courses for seniors at Cambridge University, UK. These consisted of two weeks of lectures after which each candidate presented a paper on a given topic. Audrey took great delight in these rigorous fortnights.



Audrey with her father, Bertie Armitage, at the Great Hall, University of Sydney, for her graduation with a Master of Arts degree, March 1963.

Audrey always maintained connections with Newcastle. In 1983 she wrote the history of Newcastle High School in a book entitled *Newcastle High School – The First 75 years*. She also wrote *A Golden Age of Nursing*, a history of the Nurses' Training School at the Royal Newcastle Hospital.

Audrey fitted many interests into her hectic life. These included classical music (Mozart being her favourite composer), looking after her dachshund dogs, English twentieth century poets and motor boats. She joined Kuringai Motor Yacht Club at Cottage Point as the only female member and served for 8 years on the management committee. She established the *Club Doings* magazine and was made a life member of the club.

Audrey also had an interest in planes and flying. In her eighties she took some flying lessons at the Royal Newcastle Aero Club. These had to be curtailed once her instructor realised how poor her eyesight was.

Audrey died in Belmont in 2014 at the age of 88. As her grandmother had predicted 77 years before, she had certainly made something of her life!

FLYING FASHIONS FOR FEMALES . . .

By Audrey Armitage

Would I like to go for a flight in one of the Aero Club planes? Certainly! Delighted to.

But no sooner had I accepted than the inevitable thought occurred to me: what would I wear? It was no use going home to look over the wardrobe. I know what I hadn't, so under cover of a warm Saturday afternoon when the flying weather was perfect I crept back to the Newcastle Aero Club to observe what others wore, and with how much success.

I had not thought of the cold winds that blow 1,000 or 2,000 feet up—but just over there, surely, was one woman going up at least 20,000 feet. She was wearing brown, fleecy-lined snow boots, corduroy slacks, sweater and wind jacket, while in one hand she carried a second pair of slacks. I restrained myself from saying, "Baby, it must be cold up there," and looked for another female flying fashion.

Ah! Now that was what I had thought of. A nice sensible skirt and blouse with low-heeled shoes that wouldn't get tangled in the rudder or the odd wires that fill the bottom of those training planes.

I watched with approval, till the lady started to climb aboard. It was a hobble skirt. While there are two schools of thought about how to get into a plane, neither the quick rush or the sneaking-up method seemed to be any good here. Obviously with a hobble skirt you have to take too many steps, and after a while there is no where else to step.

PERHAPS A BUSTLE?



crushed and without the look of fresh laundering.

No, I thought, it will have to be something else. Shorts? No one seemed to wear shorts. A summer frock? There was one now, going towards a waiting plane, carried by high heels. The flared skirt allowed enough room for manoeuvring — too much room. The high heels caught in the seat, and the passenger, sliding with a thump into position, came out badly

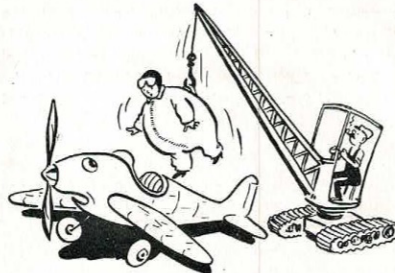
The next passenger looked as if she had the answer. It was an army disposal job, rather like a fire-fighting outfit. The complete overall zipped down the front, the ankles were drawn in by straps as were the wrists, the collar was so high that when the front was zipped right up, the head could completely disappear, and the wearer could board the plane incognito in as ungainly and unladylike manner as she wished.

That was for me, if I could borrow one.

Then I thought: what if we crash, and my battered body is taken gently from the plane at a later date? How will I look? Certainly not my best, and that is definitely an important thing on a girl's last appearance.

The indecision was with me all over again.

Then I noticed that there were several views on how the flying helmet was to be worn. They were fairly evenly divided, one-half pulling it down in a workmanlike manner, arranging the goggles with no thought to the admiring public (they were the pilots) and the other half got into it like a new spring bonnet, arranging curls to this side and that (they were the passengers). I felt rather sorry that when the great day came I would not have any curls to arrange.



Thinking over the getting-in problem too, I decided that the best thing would be a mechanical hoist which lowered the passenger feet first, and an ejector which helped the exit.

Personally I like the planes you can walk straight into, with a Paris model on (that is if you happen to have a Paris model): be handed to your seat, and be helped out again looking just as chic. But if it has to be a Tiger Moth trainer, I'll have the fire-fighting outfit.

Traveller, writer lived her dreams

OBITUARY

AUDREY ARMITAGE 1925-2014

CELEBRATED veteran journalist and author Audrey Armitage died recently, aged 89.

Armitage was born in Murwillumbah in 1925, the second of four children. She moved to Newcastle at the age of 12, and completed her schooling at Newcastle Girls' High School in 1942.

Armitage went on to study a bachelor of arts and a diploma of education at Armidale University. Upon undertaking a brief stint as a teacher, she began her much celebrated career as a journalist at ABC Radio. She moved into print journalism following a position at the *Newcastle Sun*, but soon migrated to the United Kingdom on the liner *Orontes* – a trip that took five to six weeks.

Armitage travelled around Europe with a fellow Novocastrian, journalist Jack Cahill, on Cahill's motorcycle. The two went on to obtain journalist positions at the *Parisian Continental Daily Mail*, where Armitage worked for six months. She then took a position at American Associated Press in London.

"This was an interesting and often exciting career, meeting all manner of people, celebrities, covering exciting events and historic and memorable occasions," friend Robin Gordon said.

"She'd dreamed, from childhood, of such travels and often spoke of her years of dreaming, of where she'd go and what she hoped she'd do.

"Her dreams came true and she told of these adventures – of how she took Tiffin with three Maharajas in New Delhi's top hotel, accepted a glass of champagne high over the South American chain of snow-capped volcanoes, or clinging to the top of a road barricade to watch the running of the bulls at Pamplona in Spain."

Following her return to Australia, she obtained positions as chief sub-editor and sub-editor with such celebrated newspapers as the *Melbourne Herald*, the *Sydney*



ADVENTUROUS: Audrey Armitage had an interesting and exciting life.

Morning Herald and the *Daily Mirror*. Armitage also worked as a chief sub-editor and travel editor for *Woman's Day*, the latter of which, combined with her passion for travel, led to a stint as assistant editor of *Walkabout* magazine.

In 1960, Armitage spent two years completing her masters of arts at Sydney University. Upon graduation, Gordon attests to the fact that Armitage was one of only three people with the qualification, along with Germaine Greer and Bill Peach.

Armitage soon moved on to a career as a novelist, writing for Mills & Boon. She wrote more than 30 novels, "written wisely", she said, "under another name". Her pseudonym, K.T. McCall, was soon revealed after law proceedings were lodged against her by a woman who felt misrepresented in an article. The case was quashed soon after.

In 1983, Armitage wrote the

history of Newcastle High School in a book entitled *Newcastle High School – The First 75 Years*. She also wrote *A Golden Age of Nursing*, a history of the Nurse's Training School at the Royal Newcastle Hospital.

Armitage's passion for adventure also encompassed a deep interest in motor boats. She joined Kuringai Motor Yacht Club at Cottage Point as the sole female member and served for eight years on the management committee. She established the *Club Doings* magazine and newsletter and was made a life member of the club.

In later life, Armitage joined the Royal Volunteer Coastal Patrol at Pelican, where she was a radio operator.

She was described by Gordon as a passionate and adventurous woman who loved her dogs, which she referred to as her "kids", until her passing in February.

EMMA ELSWORTHY