# EMERITUS PROFESSOR SIR STEPHEN HENRY ROBERTS CMG – FORMER VICE-CHANCELLOR (1942–67)

Professor Sir Stephen Roberts CMG (1901 - 1971) was Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Sydney and ex-officio Fellow of Senate from 1947 to 1967. *Note: the title was changed from Vice-Chancellor to Vice-Chancellor and Principal in 1955.*

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## PROFILE

(1901–1971)
CMG, MA LittD *Melb* DSc(Econ) *Lond* HonLLD *Brist, Br Col & McG* HonDCL *Durh* HonDLitt *UNE*
**Vice-Chancellor and *ex-officio* Fellow of Senate 1942 - 1967** *(the title was changed to Vice-Chancellor and Principal in 1955)*

## His background

Stephen Henry Roberts was born on 16 February 1901 at Maldon, Victoria.

He attended Castlemaine High School, Melbourne Teachers' College and the University of Melbourne (BA, 1921; MA, 1923; DLitt, 1930). He graduated with first-class honours, Wyselaskie scholarships in English constitutional history and political economy, and the Dwight prize in sociology. He was appointed assistant-lecturer and tutor in British history. In 1925 he attended the first conference sponsored by the Institute of Pacific Relations, in Honolulu. A research scholarship and a free passage enabled him to undertake research at the University of London (DSc, 1929).

He was appointed in April 1929 to the Challis Chair of History at the University of Sydney. As a member (1938) of the Board of Secondary School Studies, he influenced the design of the school curriculum and shaped history papers that reflected his world view. His History of Modern Europe became a core textbook. He was a trustee of the Public Library of New South Wales and a member of its Mitchell Library committee.

In the 1930s Roberts was involved with the Australian Institute of International Affairs, the Sydney group of the Round Table, and the Institute of Pacific Relations.

In the late 1930s Roberts repeatedly spoke of the dangers of appeasement. During World War II, as 'Our War Correspondent', he wrote a column (almost daily) for the SMH, in addition to weekly articles under his own name. Gradually, his public roles overshadowed his research and he published no major history after the war.

Stephen Henry Roberts in 1928, *photo G3_224_0261, University of Sydney Archives*.

## Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney

Dean of Arts from 1942-47 and Chairman of the Professorial Board in 1947, Roberts was appointed acting Vice-Chancellor late in 1946 and confirmed in office in October 1947; he was also University Principal from 1955. He soon proved an able administrator and quickly grasped financial issues. He chaired the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee in 1952-53; invited leaders of commerce, industry and public life to support the University's various foundations; and welcomed ambassadors and consuls to his University. The result of all his efforts was financial gain and the promotion of the University overseas.

Roberts vigorously pursued the expansion and development of the University. The report (1957) of Sir Keith Murray's Committee on Australian Universities, and consequent funding from the Menzies government, meant that Roberts had to supervise the structural expansion of the university across City Road into Darlington. In the 1960s he also had to cope with student unrest.

The recipient of numerous honours, he was appointed CMG in 1956, commander of the Danish Order of the Dannebrog (1960), the Lebanese National Order of the Cedar (1961), the Greek Order of the Phoenix (1964) and the Italian Order of Merit (1967), and to the Légion d'honneur (1967). In 1965 he was knighted. The universities of New England (1957) and Sydney (1968) in Australia, Bristol (1948) and Durham (1953) in England, and British Columbia (1956) and McGill (1958) in Canada all bestowed honorary doctorates on him.

By the time he retired in 1967, Sir Stephen had effectively transformed the University of Sydney into a modern institution of over 16,000 students, with new faculties and new research capacity.

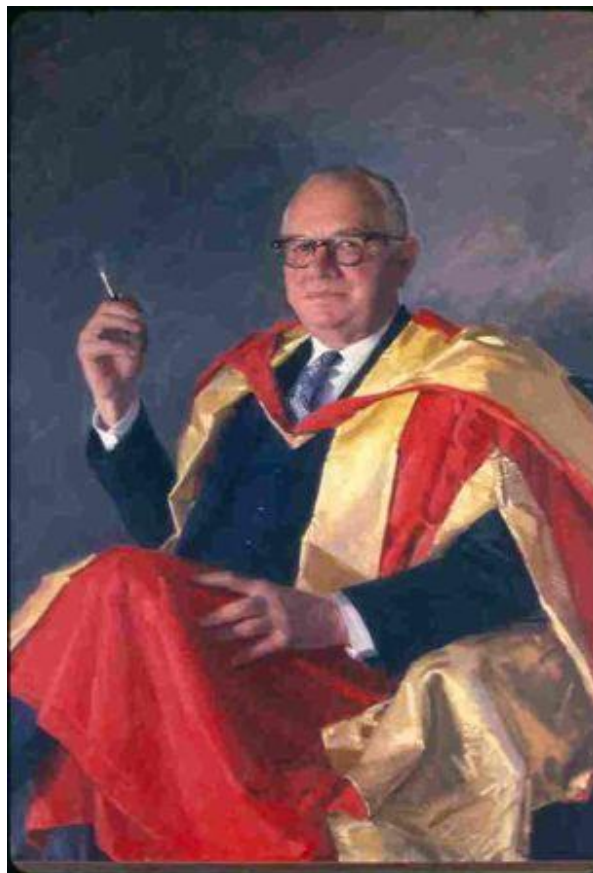*Information from the Australian Dictionary of Biography*

Sir Stephen Roberts, *photo, University of Sydney Archives*.



On the occasion of the visit of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh to the University on 4 February 1954, he is greeted by Vice-Chancellor Sir Stephen Roberts, *photo, courtesy University of Sydney Archives*. From left: President of the NSW University of Technology Wallace Wurth, HRH, Deputy Chancellor of the University of Sydney Sir Charles McDonald, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney Sir Stephen Roberts CMG and Vice-President of the NSW University of Technology Sir John Clancy KBE CMG.

Sir Stephen Roberts in his University office, *photo, University of Sydney Archives.*



**Portrait of Sir Stephen Roberts, 1967, by Sir William Dargie (1912-2003), oil on canvas, commissioned by the University of Sydney,** *(University Art Collection, reproduced with the kind permission of Roger Dargie and the University of Sydney).*

## Honorary Doctor of Letters

The honorary degree Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Emeritus Professor Sir Stephen Henry Roberts CMG by Chancellor Sir Charles George McDonald KCMG KSG on 25 January 1968.



Emeritus Professor Sir Stephen Henry Roberts CMG and Chancellor Sir Charles George McDonald KCMG KSG - the honorary degree Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Sir Stephen on 25 January 1968, *photo, University of Sydney Archives*.

## In memoriam

Emeritus Professor Sir Stephen Henry Roberts died of hypertensive coronary vascular disease on 19 March 1971 aboard the Marconi, near Port Melbourne.

- Memorial ceremony, 3 April 1971 - A Memorial Ceremony in honour of the late Emeritus Professor Sir Stephen Roberts was held in the Great Hall on Saturday, April 3. Addresses were given by the Chancellor, Mr H D Black; Professor J M Ward, Professor of History; and Mr R R Downing, MLC, a former Fellow of the Senate.
- The Chancellor spoke on Sir Stephen's contribution to the University as Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Ward on his contributions as a scholar, and Mr Downing on his contributions to the general community.