

Dr Jill Ker Conway

The degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) was conferred upon Dr Jill Ker Conway at the Arts ceremony held at 2.00pm on 12 May 2006.



Dr Ker Conway with Chancellor the Hon Justice Kim Santow after conferral of the honorary degree, *photos, copyright Memento Photography.*

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, Jill Kathryn Ker Conway.

Jill Ker Conway is of that rare and cherished breed – the university scholar and administrator, who has become pre-eminent as both. She is among the foremost writers, perhaps the foremost writer, of American feminist history. She was Vice-President of The University of Toronto – Canada's oldest university – before

becoming President of Smith College, the leading United States tertiary college for women. There she became a passionate advocate and fund-raiser for women's education. She gave older women academic opportunity previously denied them. She is both a writer of highly acclaimed autobiography and an erudite analyst of that genre.

She has written of the intellectual excitement but career-limitations of her seminal student days at this university, where she studied English and history. Indeed it was here that Professor John Ward - later to become Vice-Chancellor - taught American history to the young Jill Ker, and where Professor Wilkes taught English imbued with the lyricisms of T.S. Eliot and Christopher Brennan, which resonate in Conway's own later writing.

This is not Dr Conway's first degree from Sydney, but it is her first degree conferral here. In The United States such ceremonies are known as Commencement; they mark the commencement of a new life and opportunity. But for Jill Ker in 1958 this would have been 'a bizarre charade'; for she was 'an ambitious young woman facing a constrained female destiny'. She left these shores for America believing that her sex ruled out any possibility of an interesting career in Australia.

How times change – or, to quote from her old school motto, how 'time flies'. This University is now consciously international in all its endeavours. And although Australia is still behind both Britain and The United States in that a woman does not presently head our Foreign Service, the opportunities for young women graduating today are immeasurably greater than they were when Jill Ker, university medalist in history and would-be-diplomat, was turned down by the Department of External Affairs. It is, of course, notable that, even in the 90s, Jill Ker Conway was the sole female member of the board of directors of Nike, an American company which, obsessively, brands itself as hip!

It was 'The Road from Coorain', the first book in an autobiographical trilogy, which brought Jill Ker Conway to international prominence, especially in Australia and Britain, where its Australian outback dust-jacket in Piccadilly shop-windows caught the eye of many an Antipodean passer-by. In it she describes her emotionally traumatic journey from childhood physical rigours on the western plains of New South Wales, through an academically demanding but very 'English' secondary schooling at Abbotsleigh, to heady challenges at Sydney University. It is a saga of opportunity and constraint, and of profound tensions engendered by time and place. Its early pastoral chapters are written in haunting language of 'Old Testament' simplicity. Its ending depicts the visitation of one generation's difficulties upon the next, as her own mother finds no outlet for creative talent.

Then in its sequel 'True North', soon to be followed by 'A Woman's Education', we read of Harvard postgraduate student days, a thesis on 'The first generation of American women graduates', marriage to her history professor, John Conway, and her ultimate arrival at Smith College. Subsequently, she joined the corporate world, becoming, most prominently, the first female chair of the board of directors of Lend Lease.

'Insular', in one sense, 1950s Australia may have been. But it is a curious fact that in the mid-twentieth century the University of Sydney sent forth into the world three famously very different pioneers for the rights of women – Catherine Hamlin in Ethiopia, Jill Ker in the United States, and Germaine Greer in Britain. We are proud of them and of all our daughters.

Dr Conway has, throughout her careers, sought to increase the scope and opportunities available to women, to encourage them to see and to seize the opportunities which exist. We are glad to take this opportunity to honour her work. Chancellor, I present Jill Kathryn Ker Conway for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, and I invite you to confer the degree upon her.