

Dame Joan Sutherland AC DBE

The degree of Doctor of Music (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon Dame Joan Sutherland AC DBE by the Chancellor Sir Hermann Black in September 1984.

Dame Joan had been Leading Soprano, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London since 1952.



Dame Joan Sutherland and Chancellor Sir Hermann Black, *photo, University of Sydney Archives.*

Report

In presenting Dame Joan for her degree, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor John Ward, said that it was now ten years since she had returned to Sydney to give her support to the Australian Opera. She was a woman of 'exceptional achievement, great courage and generous human qualities'.

Dame Joan was described by the Chancellor Sir Hermann Black as one who 'burns that others may have light'.

In an interview after the ceremony at the reception in the MacLaurin Hall, she told the News that her maternal great-grandfather was responsible for the Gothic Revival stonework of the old medical school (the Anderson Stuart Building) and had designed other stonework around the University.

'He and his son, Alexander Alston, were skilled stonemasons who came out from Scotland when the Gothic Revival style became less popular there', she said. 'They worked together on buildings at the University - and also at Callan Park at Gladesville.'

A letter in the Archives, dated 1886, confirms that Alston and Company were the masonry contractors for the Medical School but the connection with Dame Joan was previously unknown here.

'My only other connection with the University,' Dame Joan went on, 'apart from some Sutherland nephews who studied here, is that my first job was at the Radiophysics Section of the CSIR in the grounds. I'd just left secretarial school, and typed reports on radar and missiles during World War II.' (The CSIR - Council for Scientific and Industrial Research - was the fore-runner of the CSIRO, and was housed in the present Madsen Building. Its radar research was classified as 'top secret' during the war). It was in 1949 that Dame Joan won the Sun Aria Competition that launched her on her career.

From 'The University of Sydney News', 18 September 1984

Extract from "La Stupenda", a biography of Joan Sutherland by Brian Adams:

Sutherland (who had been made a Dame of the British Empire in 1979) and Richard Bonyngue returned to Sydney at the beginning of July 1984, for the Australian Opera's tenth anniversary production of Les Contes d'Hoffmann.

During this visit home, Sutherland received the honorary doctorate of music from the University of Sydney, and there seemed few further honours to be gained. Wearing a scarlet and grey robe and black academic cap, she was among a group of graduates accepting their degrees, and when asked, after the ceremony, how many doctorates she now held, Sutherland admitted to having 'Arts, Laws and Letters and a couple of music ones stuck away somewhere'.

She added, 'But I'm delighted to have another one from Sydney'.

Her final Australian performances for 1984 came with Poulenc's Dialogues of the Carmelites.