

## **DEIRDRE M. AIREY, Q.S.M., MB.,ChB.**

Deirdre Airey died at Coromandel on 16th August, 2002. She was born in Christchurch, the only daughter of Bill and Isabel Airey. She was educated at Epsom Girl's Grammar School and Otago University, graduating MB.ChB in 1951.

Following a year as House Surgeon at Auckland she went to Britain for further experience, travelling as ships surgeon on a cargo vessel. In Britain she spent approximately two years each in hospitals at Newcastle, Durham and at Great Ormond Street, London. She spent holidays with friends at Oxford, and there she converted to Catholicism which was to have a profound effect on the remainder of her life. Travelling in Italy she was impressed with the wealth and variety of art, and this kindled in her a life long interest in the visual arts.

Returning to New Zealand in 1960, again as ships surgeon, she was appointed to the position of part-time Medical Superintendent of Coromandel Hospital with the right of private practice. For this she had to obtain her driving licence and her first car. In general practice at Coromandel she was for many years the sole practitioner, and, when the practitioner at Whitianga was absent, had to cover the entire Coromandel Peninsula North of Thames. This was in the era of shingle roads before car ownership was universal in the area, and doctors were obliged to do home visits at any hour. Her concern for the wellbeing of her patients, and especially the poor, kept her on the road at all hours. For this devotion and dedication to duty she was awarded the Q.S.M.

She had a wide range of interests. Outdoors she had a keen interest in gardening and was very supportive of moves to preserve the environment. Even in busy times she could find time for a daily swim at a nearby beach. Indoors she was interested in spinning and weaving. She had a great love of reading, and was instrumental in the provision of a new library building for the town. With others she established a Shakespeare reading group which met regularly. She wrote articles for newspapers on religious topics, stories (unpublished) and at the time of her death was busy with an autobiography. With a small group of artists she helped organise and exhibited in an annual Easter art show at Coromandel.

Perhaps the activity other than medicine for which she became most widely known was the making of terra cotta wall tiles, mostly on biblical subjects. For these she would painstakingly work the clay, reworking it again and again until the tile was to her satisfaction. The firing of her work was done by Barry Brickell, a well known Coromandel potter. Even after the firing, some of the tiles would not be to her satisfaction, and she would return again and again to the same subject over the years to make a better version.

Shortly after her retirement from general practice in 1987 she developed Rheumatoid Arthritis which rapidly progressed until she was unable to walk. Despite the devastating effect this disease had on her hands, and the fact that for the last 3½ years of her life she was confined to a wheelchair, she continued working her clay tiles, and with the assistance of home help, was able to remain in her own home.

The high regard with which she was held in the community was demonstrated at her funeral where the church was packed to capacity and the service was relayed to twice as many mourners again outside.

I am indebted to her brother, Alastair, for much of the information in this obituary.

Deirdre M. Airey, 9 December 1926 - 16 August 2002.