

Many of our Bridge colleagues have been movers and shakers, high achievers, local legends at some stage, but very few have their own Wikipedia entries. And only one of them was included amongst 16 professional women profiled in 1982 book *The Half-Open Door*. That one was of course Deirdre FitzGerald, who seems to have graced every eminent committee, board, tribunal or council during a stellar career.

She chose well when it came to parental grey matter. Papa was a leading architect, mama a highly qualified teacher of French and German. The eldest of the six Moriarty siblings, Deirdre was born before World War II at the time of the Nazis' Berlin Olympics. Fortunately she was just under 16,000 kilometres from the Games and Herr Hitler, enjoying an idyllic childhood in Melbourne's Kew.



During the ensuing War her parents, who knew absolutely nothing about farming, decided to move to a 40-acre property at Mount Evelyn in the Yarra Valley. Lots of city children had been evacuated to the area, so the small Mount Lilydale Convent had about 60 students, compared to its current 1527. The numbers in the more senior classes in those days were not all that swollen, with Deirdre being one of just two students doing Matriculation.



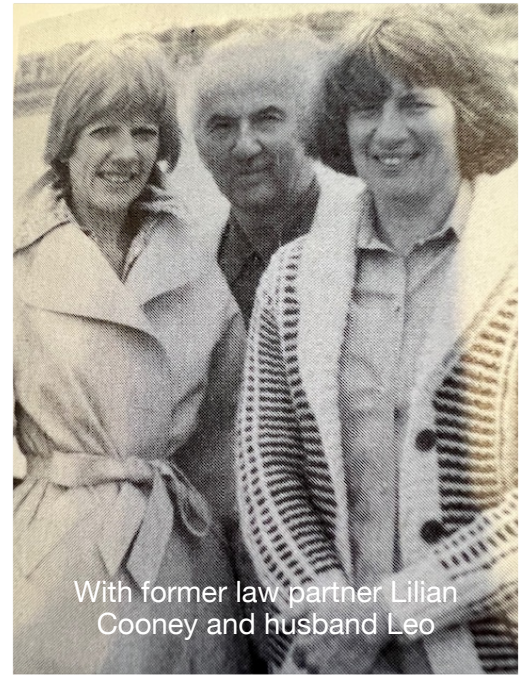
Jackie Kennedy
lookalike

She was of course awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to University, at the time when students studied just one discipline. All the Moriarty children made it to University, the following five all sporting at least two degrees. Poor Deirdre had to be content with one. So she made the most of it, in spades.

Her father had died, the family was not very well off and no-one knew anything about farming but there were lots of relatives in Melbourne for all those Uni students to stay with. Graduating in Law in 1957 she swiftly worked her way up from being a lowly articulated clerk to accepting a fellow graduate's invitation in 1962 to join her in taking over the graduate's father's solicitor's practice. It was Melbourne's first female law partnership.

Think 1962: Kennedy was still alive, the Bay of Pigs gained notoriety — and not just for having an awful name. The Aussie Parliament graciously decided to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the vote. Our troops entered the Vietnam War. We still had pounds, shillings and pence, and bank managers were scared of ladies. Honest ... ask any woman who tried to get a home loan in that period. Bankers just got the shakes at the thought of it but Our Deirdre of course ignored all that and charged ahead, putting together a massive £1000 deposit for a flat in Kensington Road, South Yarra.

The highly successful mostly female firm (they let a couple of blokes in occasionally — useful if you want to re-arrange the furniture) expanded into three practices taking on Dandenong and Oakleigh.



With former law partner Lilian Cooney and husband Leo



The Law Institute of Victoria mounted an exhibition of highlights, including of course the then Ms Moriarty

Now versed in all aspects of the law Deirdre left the practice in the mid 1970s, her achievements by that stage including a two-year stint as President of the Women Lawyers' Association, becoming the first female elected to the Law Institute Council of Victoria and also the first Secretary of the Second Division Officers' Association* to wear a skirt. (*of the Public Service)

Amongst other changes that had members of the Melbourne Club choking on their port, the then Whitlam Government had introduced* the *Family Law Act*, and with it

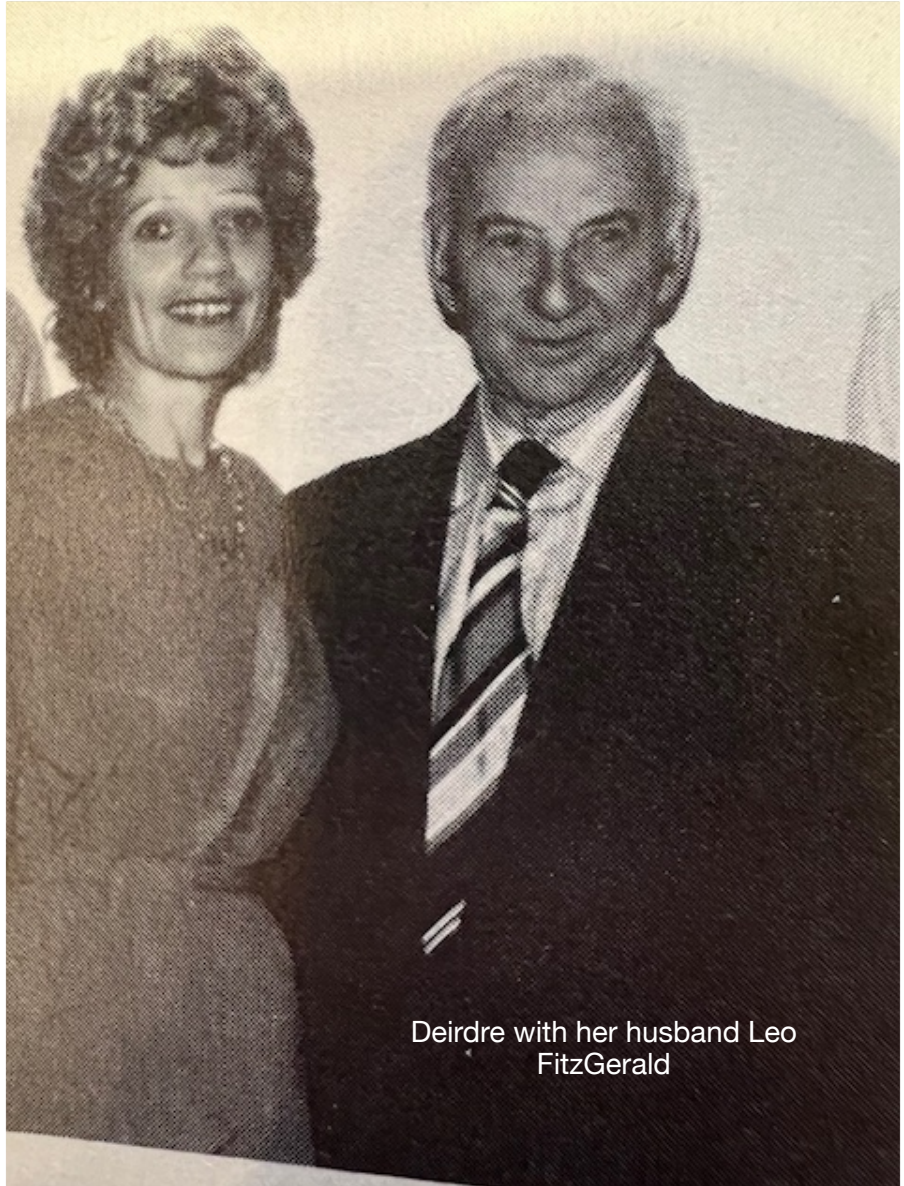
'no-fault divorce', meaning that the unhappily married no longer had to separate for five years before divorce, or have a hotel chambermaid testify that they had spoken to a member of the opposite sex while wearing pyjamas. (*By the time it actually came into effect, Gough Whitlam had received his walking orders and Malcolm Fraser was Prime Minister.)

Always interested in tax law, Deirdre fell in love with a man who knew the lot. Widower Leo FitzGerald was the Deputy Commissioner for Taxation. Nineteen years her senior, with five children, he understood the pressures of Deirdre's career.

And so the Family Court was established and who do you think was appointed its first Registrar? The ever brilliant Ms Moriarty, just before marrying Leo and spending a Surfers Paradise honeymoon studying the Family Law Act while they sunbaked.

Establishing a whole new system, staff, accommodation, stationery, furniture had to be tackled through Christmas 1975 for an early January opening of the floodgates. A life that had once been hectic was now frantic. Divorce rates quickly quadrupled to 20,000 in the first year. Divorce was now relatively easy, but the Court was deluged with the accompanying traumas over property and most importantly children.

After two years working at top speed, Deirdre was invited to apply for the post as the inaugural Chairman of the Victorian Equal Opportunity Board. Again a totally



Deirdre with her husband Leo FitzGerald

new organisation and structure had to be established, and of course she did it superbly.

Retiring from the Board in 1980, Deirdre was highly sought after by many organisations and served on or chaired more than a dozen councils, tribunals and commissions. The work, some part-time, some full-time, covered a wide range of issues. She was on a three-person committee to review Victoria's mental health legislation which resulted in the establishment of the Mental Health Review Tribunal & the Guardianship Board.



Then there was the Social Security Appeals Tribunal (two stints here - one as Chairperson, later as a Senior Member), the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, the Small Claims Tribunal, the Veteran's Review Board, the Metropolitan Fire & Emergency Services Appeals Commission, the Country Fire Authority Appeals Commission, the Optometry Board, the Psychology Board, the Medical Practitioners Board and the Australian Press Council. She seems to have had an intellectual finger in every pie going, but vows she cannot cook. Leo was the king of the kitchen.

The young Queen Elizabeth left decoration of the family pad (Clarence House) to the Duke of Edinburgh when she was a tad busy. Deirdre and Leo bought an Ivanhoe property of five units and turned it into a large family home — actually Leo did, Deirdre was a tad busy.

After he died in 1997, Deirdre sold the place and returned to Kew, where she still resides during Melbourne days, as against her sun-filled apartment up here for her Noosa days.

In Melbourne Deirdre met former Bridge Clubber Lois Gorman (who recently relocated to the Gold Coast) when both had recently lost their husbands. So they started travelling together. Lois does all the organising, Deirdre turns up on time, hugely enjoying it all but not bothering much with the detail.



Travels with Lois, some place, somewhere —
who cares about the detail

After a legal life like hers,
ignoring the details would
be bliss. And after a life of
so much public service
surely bliss is what she
deserves.

by Susie Osmaston