

snapshot



Stratigraphy: Dr Ida Alison Browne 1900–1976

Dr Ida Browne's life exemplified the transition from bright ambitiousness to quiet and modest service to science that characterised the careers of many women scientists of her generation. An obvious high-flyer, she was encouraged by her headmistress at Fort St Girls' High School, Fanny Cohen, whom she resembled by graduating with Honours and the University Medal in Geology and Minerology and Mathematics at the University of Sydney in 1922. However, she then relinquished her research scholarship at the request of Professor David in order to work as a Demonstrator, determinedly pursuing research despite her heavy teaching load. She then held a Linnean-Macleay fellowship to research the geology of the south coast of New South Wales. In this work she not only carried out insightful and meticulous mapping and fieldwork, but also made bold theoretical suggestions on the petrogenesis of igneous rocks and on certain geohistorical events.

In 1932 she was awarded the DSc, the second woman at the University of Sydney to be so honoured. Congratulations poured in from all sides that recognised her ambition. "I liked your direct way of going for the Doctorate instead of proceeding by way of the Masters degree," her friend from the Australian Museum, E. C. Andrews, told her. Hinting at the difficulties she might face, prominent feminist Marie Byles wrote, "I shall look forward to seeing you end up as Professor of Geology, if not in this University, then in some other, for a prophet is not without honour save in her own country".

Indeed, Ida Brown then found herself "with nothing to do". The Geology Department was already well accommodated with lecturers in its specialty of petrological research and, as a woman, she was forbidden to work underground and could not get an appointment with a mining company. However, in 1935 the Department lost its lecturer in palaeontology and "Dr Ida", as she was often affectionately known, took up the post. This allowed her to continue the scientific work she loved, but it came at the price of heavy teaching loads and the difficulty of entering a new field. Enormously isolated, it was not until she travelled overseas in 1939 to observe others that she felt confident about research. She specialised in systematic studies of brachiopods, using this to help stratigraphical research, especially in the Yass region.

Dr Ida thus dedicated her working life to the provision of adequate resources for those who would succeed her, adding to the geological library, teaching and promoting



palaeontology, and undertaking basic mapping. In addition she served the scientific community, being the first female President of the Royal Society of New South Wales and the Linnean Society of New South Wales. She always developed close and generous relationships with her colleagues, both within and beyond Australia.

In 1950 Ida Brown resigned and married her senior colleague William Rowan Browne, prompting a colleague to comment jocularly, "Hearty congratulations on your most laudable effort to standardise spelling, which I hope will soon be achieved!" The announcement of her marriage surprised even those closest to her; her father reputedly was so shocked that he spent the day in bed speechless. Amid the warnings of some against giving up her career for home duties and the jubilation of others that she could do so at last, Dr Ida continued her research in companionship. Modest and unassuming, Dr Ida's death resembled that of the brachiopods she worked to understand: noted only by those who knew and loved her in minute detail.

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