

**Jump TO Article**



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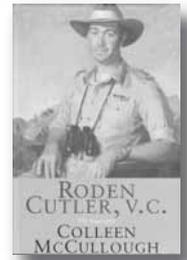
**Jump TO Article**

## ***Roden Cutler, V.C.: the biography***

by Colleen McCullough

*Random House: Milsons Point, NSW; 1998; 418 pp.; ISBN 0 091 83933 5*

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Esteemed novelist Colleen McCullough's first non-fiction work, a biography of Sir Roden Cutler, VC, AK, KCMG, KCVO, CBE, a former patron of the then United Service Institution of New South Wales, is a fine portrait of one of Australia's most admired men.

Roden's childhood at Manly included shooting floating tins with a 0.22 inch rifle and plenty of swimming, cricket and bicycling. After high school, Cutler wanted to attend university but, as his pass was not high enough to get a public service appointment, he studied economics at night while working 48 hours a week for what is now known as Texaco. His father's death in a car accident when Roden was 19 meant Roden's wage became central to the survival of his remaining family. In 1935, Roden at last was able to join the New South Wales Public Service. This meant no work on Saturdays, but it involved a significant drop in salary.

A friend suggested Roden join him in the Sydney University Regiment (SUR), part of the then citizen's militia. Roden considered this would ensure he had a proper holiday twice a year (the two SUR camps!) and could use his public service leave to study before his annual examinations. Having been taught to shoot by his late father, an accomplished marksman, Cutler became the regimental marksman! He was commissioned a lieutenant in the field battery in 1939.

In April 1940 at age 24, Roden transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Imperial Force and was commissioned a lieutenant in 2/5<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, 7<sup>th</sup> Division. Roden's leadership, navigational skills, calm manner and strong physical fitness were soon apparent. Between 19 June and 6 July 1941, near Merdjayoun and Damour, Syria, while an artillery forward observer with the advancing Australian infantry, Roden carried out several acts of outstanding bravery, including establishing an observation post between the Australians and the enemy, repairing the telephone line to the outpost under heavy fire, engaging the enemy positions with artillery fire, repulsing enemy tank and infantry attacks on the outpost with an anti-tank rifle and a Bren gun, and, after establishing another outpost in the town which was occupied by the Foreign Legion, registering a field battery on the only road the French could use into Merdjayoun. Later, he was seriously wounded and, when rescued 26 hours later, his leg had to be amputated. Upon being told he had been awarded the Victoria Cross for these actions he laughed thinking it was a joke – then, after the speaker checked his name a second time, a mistake!

Arrival home meant several operations, but Roden wanted to do something to serve Australia's servicemen and to support his family. He became the first World War II veteran to join what is now the Returned and Services League and was appointed secretary of the New South Wales Branch. Continued difficulties with his amputated leg during the extensive travelling led him to resign that post and join the National Security Service, the forerunner of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. In 1943, the Commonwealth Government appointed him to reorganise the Repatriation Department, before transferring him to External Affairs.

His first diplomatic post, as High Commissioner in New Zealand with his first wife, Helen, prepared him well for more complex posts later in Ceylon and in Egypt during the Suez crisis, which tested Roden and Helen, and required their sons to be educated away from their parents. Two years in Canberra followed, then a posting to Pakistan – a lively time. The consulate in New York followed, with Roden overseeing purchases of military equipment from the United States. The next posting may well have been The Hague or Burma, but paying large airfares for four boys in school in the United Kingdom (to avoid the constant moving required for their father's employment) was a heavy financial drain.

In 1965, still only 49-years-old, Cutler accepted an invitation to be Governor of New South Wales. He held the position for 15 years, becoming the state's longest serving governor, during which he hosted visits from several heads of state, including the Queen and Prince Philip. A few incidents reflecting the difficult political times of the Vietnam War and dismissal of the Whitlam government are described. Perhaps the saddest story is of the sudden death of Helen, his first wife, from meningitis. The reader is introduced to his second wife, Joan, who was a friend of Helen's.

The biography is written in a warm, easy style, in which the reader feels as though they are a friend moving about with Cutler through a milieu of friends, servicemen and diplomats; correct but never cold – rather like the man himself. I only knew him from the intimate dinners at Government House, Sydney, given by Sir Roden and Lady Helen each year for the commanding officers of the Royal New South Wales Regiment and their wives. The book captures both the underlying sincerity and the diplomatic correctness that he conveyed.

**Priscilla Leece**