



“Lore and the Law” by John O’Keeffe
Launch – Banco Court
Tuesday, 13 March 2007, 5:30pm

The Hon Paul de Jersey AC
Chief Justice of Queensland

I am very pleased this evening to launch Mr O’Keeffe’s work, “Lore and the Law”.

John O’Keeffe and his forebears are inextricably intertwined with the history of the Queensland legal profession. His personal experiences and observations resonate beyond the life of a truly dedicated professional: they speak to our shared past, to which the O’Keeffe family was unquestionably integral. In terms of both private practice and public service, Mr O’Keeffe was at the forefront of a quiet revolution in the practice of law in Australia. This oral history accordingly amounts to a compelling account not only of a remarkable man, but of a critical phase of change for the modern profession.

John descends from pastoralists who migrated to Australia from Tipperary, Ireland in the mid 19th century, at the end of the Great Potato Famine. He attended law school at UQ via a Commonwealth scholarship, while serving articles at Tully & Wilson, under Kivas Tully, Brigadier Charles Wilson, and John Florence. He was admitted as a solicitor of the Supreme Court in 1959, and practised primarily in the areas of corporate and finance law. He is also a descendant, on the maternal side, of the well-known Power family. He succeeded in what was for a long time a somewhat closed and insulated profession.

Corrs Chambers Westgarth is as we know a national law firm, the result of a series of mergers. In Queensland, the process began with the combining of Tully & Wilson and Chambers McNab & Co in 1981. The national integration of the legal profession has been a significant development in response to the forces of globalisation, and from his perspective as the inaugural Chairman of Partners in Queensland of the national firm, John O’Keeffe provides intriguing commentary on the formation of the firm, and life and practice both before and after the merger.

In addition to his accomplishments as a practitioner in private practice, John served with the Queensland Law Society in various useful capacities. He sat on the Symposium



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Committee. He vigorously campaigned for, and ultimately established, the Young Members’ Committee. He was elected to the Council, and later served as Vice President before ultimately ascending to the Presidency. As former chief representative of Queensland’s solicitors, Mr O’Keeffe delivers telling insight into the developments taking place both inside and outside the organisation.

Our author was innovative as well as insightful. He promoted reforms in legal education. He was a staunch supporter of the Continuing Legal Education programme, a hallmark of current legal practice, and organised and participated in seminars during the far reaching shifts in Queensland’s company law in the 1960s, and property law in the 1970s. He was also involved in various committees advising on the establishment of the Law School at the Queensland Institute of Technology, as it was then known, and served as a foundation lecturer in practical aspects of company law.

Since retiring from practice in 2000, John has remained dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the legal profession and, to that end, chaired the Solicitors’ Complaints Tribunal from its inauguration in 1997 until he retired from practice. He is also more widely involved in the community and currently sits on the Professional Conduct Tribunal of the Queensland Branch of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, and is a longstanding member of the Queensland Commandery of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem, of which he is a past president. That Order supports charitable organisations, locally and around the world.

The international dimension of John’s character extends beyond his kind works. He and Sybil have journeyed to the far reaches of the earth. Whilst Sybil maintains her vocation as a pharmacist, their son John is a chartered accountant and a legal practitioner admitted in New South Wales. Their elder daughter Mary holds degrees in arts and business from the University of Queensland, and presently works in London. John himself moved the admission of their younger daughter, Frances, as a legal practitioner before me on 29 January of this year. Though it is John who has held a central role in the development of our contemporary profession, Sybil and the children are the vital part of his personal history.



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Mr O’Keeffe is a member of the Supreme Court Library History Program Subcommittee and has been involved with a number of its oral history publications. This volume marks a further valuable contribution to that end. Through his candid exposition and incisive commentary, John first informs our collective memory of his distinctive point of view and, second, reminds us of the importance of knowing the past in order better to understand the present.

Lore and the Law derives from a series of interviews between our author and the Supreme Court Librarian, Mr Aladin Rahemtula, as part of the Library’s Oral History Program initiative. I take this opportunity to note the importance of that project, and to thank both the Librarian and his staff, and John O’Keeffe himself, for their ongoing dedication to the preservation of the legal history of Queensland.

It was my privilege to write a foreword, in which I seek to synthesize my case for warmly commending this book to the reader. It is with great pleasure that I now launch ‘Lore and the Law’.