

PASSION FOR SCIENCE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Manuel James Aroney AM, OBE 1932-2011

Manuel James Aroney was the only child of Dimitrios (Jim) and Stamatina Aroney who migrated to Australia from the Greek Island of Kythira in 1908 and 1923, respectively. They met and married in Townsville in 1926, set up the Central Cafe in Mackay, later moved to Sydney where Manuel was born and returned in 1933 to Mackay to try to escape the world of the Great Depression. It was there that Manuel Aroney did his schooling and gained a prestigious Queensland open scholarship, awarded to the top 25 students in the state and, as well, a Commonwealth scholarship.

Taking up the latter, he enrolled at the University of Sydney and gained the degrees BSc with first class honours (1955), MSc (1956) and PhD (1961). He was appointed teaching fellow in Chemistry in 1955, temporary lecturer in 1958, permanent lecturer in 1962 and senior lecturer in 1965. His mentor and long-term colleague in research was the internationally renowned physical-organic chemist Professor R.J.W. Le Fèvre FAA, FRS, Head of the School of Chemistry.

Following an extensive tour of universities and research institutes in the United Kingdom, Europe and Israel, and the initiation of collaborative research projects with colleagues in Australia and overseas, Aroney was given accelerated promotion to Associate Professor, a relatively new rank and rare in the University of that era.

At the end of 1970 Professor Le Fèvre retired and reorganisation of the Chemistry School took place in which the physical-organic section was broken up and Aroney was placed, somewhat incongruously, in the newly formed Department of Inorganic Chemist. In 1977 he was appointed Head of the School of Chemistry, a position he accepted but, shortly after relinquished because of ill health; in fact, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack a few months later.

He was a fellow of the Royal Australia Chemical Institute, a fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry (London), and in the late eighties he became a Member of the International Committee for Molecular Electro-Optics and a member of the Australian Academy of Forensic Sciences.

In 1960, Manuel married Anne Pascalis, Daughter of Theo and Athina Pascalis of Woollongong. They would go on to have three sons.

In addition to his university duties, Manuel Aroney was deeply involved in community activities. In 1975 he was a foundation member of the Ethnic Communities Council of New South Wales, an umbrella group for several hundred ethnic associations which was able to act as an advocate

body in negotiating with government's and policy makers to bring about society change and equal opportunity within the emerging multicultural society of Australia.

From 1977-81 Aroney was a member of the National Ethnic Broadcasting Advisory Council charged with advising the Commonwealth Government on multilingual electronic media, a politically sensitive issue following the Whitlam years. In the period of 1978-81 he served as one of the four members of the first board of the Federal Governments Special Broadcasting Service which made ethnic radio permanent across Australia and, with Bruce Gyngell, Established the SBS television service. Aroney was in the unique position of being a member of both the Board and the Advisory Council. He was appointed a member of the Australia Institute of Multicultural Affairs (1981-83).

In the period 1981-86 Aroney was a commissioner of the Commonwealth Human Rights Commission whose function it was to promote and protect human rights in Australia. Together with the Government, it was responsible in overseeing and implementing the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, the Human Rights Commission Act 1981 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1884. He was the voice of the ethnic groups, a matter well known and acknowledged in the ethnic communities.

In 1983 Manuel Aroney chaired a selection panel which assessed proposals from various institutions and ultimately selected the Australian National University to produce, as a bicentennial project, "The Australian People - An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, its People and their Origins" (ed. James Jupp).

During this decade Professor Aroney's contribution to society were recognised by the award in 1980 of an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) for services to the university and to the community and in 1989 of an AM (Member of the Order of Australia) for services to Multiculturalism and the Greek community.

In 1991 Manuel Aroney was awarded the degree DSc (Doctor of Science) by the university of Sydney in recognition of his distinguished scientific research in atomic bonding and molecular structure investigated by a range of techniques of physics.

His work received high praise from an international panel of experts, one of whom, later quoted in the citation, described Aroney as "a true grandmaster in his chosen field". Overall, his studies produced 140 research papers and reviews in top level international scientific journals and, as well, a large number of conference papers and abstracts.

Further ill health led to his retirement in 1994 after 39 years of academic service at the University. He contin-



ued as an honorary staff member and for 11 years was President of the Foundation for Inorganic Chemistry whose charter is to bring together management and research leaders from industry, eminent academics from overseas, and chemistry staff and alumni of the University of Sydney.

Manuel Aroney gained recognition for his achievements not only within Australia but also in Greece. In 1982 he was given the rare and prestigious honour of being elected Corresponding member of the Academy of Athens as a distinguished Professor of Science. In 1994 he was accorded the great distinction of being made a Honorary Doctor of the University of Athens.

Two years later Aroney organised with the Office of International Relations of the University of Athens for the Rector of that University to lead a delegation to Australia to sign agreements establishing academic and cultural ties between Athens and the Universities of Sydney and of New South Wales. The honour, Commander of the Order of the Phoenix, was given to him in 1998 by the president of the Hellenic Republic.

In October 1996 Aroney went to Athens, representing the first Greek Australian Museum Foundation, for meetings with the Minister for Culture of the Greek Government, Professor Evangelos Venizelos. Within weeks, he was able to secure a written understanding in which the ministry agreed to send to Sydney for the 2000 Olympics, original antiquities from the classical games of Olympia. This committee, which Aroney went on to chair, brought together the Greek Minister for Culture, Premier Bob Carr & the Powerhouse Museum in organising and presenting a wonderful exhibition of Greek Olympics treasures, most of which had never before been allowed to leave Greece.

Throughout his adult life Professor

Aroney had also been involved in the work of the church. In 1972 he was given the title Archon of the Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople for services to the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia. Since its inception in 1983, he served on the Board of Governors of St. Spyridon Greek Orthodox College at Kingsford and Maroubra, and from 1986 he was a member of the student selection Committee of the St. Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College. Earlier he served on an Interim Committee concerned with the academic organisation and operation of the Theological College, which remains the only accredited Orthodox institution of its kind the Southern Hemisphere. Aroney was later to represent the college for about 8 years on the council of the oecumenical tertiary institute, the Sydney College of Divinity.

Manuel Aroney had a strong involvement with the Greek Community and was, over the years, a member of many Greek-Australian organisations, including the Kytherian Association of Australia, the International Kythiraios group of which he was NSW chairman, the Sydney University of Greek students' society, as founding member and first chairman, the Australian and Hellenic Educational and Progressive Association (AHEPA), Australian Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles to Greece, The Castellorizian Club, The Hellenic Club where he served as a Director for 15 years, the Nicholas Anthony Aroney Trust with its manifold charitable and culture activities. His contributions to Kythera and its people were officially recognised in April 2008 by award of the Kytherian Medal of Honour recently struck by the regional government of the island.

Manuel will be fondly remembered by legions of people, in the University and especially in the Greek Community of Sydney, for his generosity of spirit, his caring nature, his sense of fun, his advice and help so willingly given to so many over almost five decades. He was accorded great respect and was regarded by Greek families as a worthy role model for their children. He gave his best to all who sought his assistance - It was not in the nature to do otherwise.

He is survived by his loving, caring & devoted wife Anne, sons Jim & Theodore, both medical practitioners, Stephen, a lawyer, daughters-in-law Evelyn, Felicia and Sophia and eight wonderful grandchildren, James, Michael, Alanah, Emeil, William, Emmanuel, Anne-Marie and Demitra. They will all miss him dearly and always have very fond and loving memories of him.