Patricia Rolfe, 1920-2008

Pat Rolfe helped revive *The Bulletin*.

DAME EDNA EVERAGE can thank Patricia Rolfe for her early style. It was Pat who ventured into the ladies department of Waltons on Park Street, Barry Humphries in tow, looking for dresses to fit him. And if that wasn’t daunting enough, the shoe department was even worse: Humphries had very large feet.

Humphries remembered the occasion: "It was in an age when Edna still bought some of her clothes off the peg. It was an exhilarating day's shopping with a remarkable and civilised woman."

Rolfe's claim to fame, however, was first and foremost as a journalist, working at *The Bulletin* for more than 35 years, as columnist, deputy editor, literary editor and mentor to many of the bright young things who wandered through. Malcolm Turnbull, Bob Carr and David Marr were among them. Marr saw her as "a great and unobtrusive teacher of writing and thinking, a very serious person and a realist."

Pat Rolfe, who has died of a heart attack at 87, joined Australian Consolidated Press in the early 1950s, starting on the *Women's Weekly*. She was one of the early female foreign correspondents when posted to London in 1953, Frank Packer giving her a pay rise to help defray extra expenses. She spent four years away, making lifelong friendships with fellow
Antipodean journalists Elizabeth Riddell and Donald Horne. She and Horne would later combine to revive an ailing Bulletin magazine.

Rolfe was born on the last day of 1920 in Katoomba, the middle of three girls to William and Alicia Rolfe. Her early education was at the local convent school, Mount St Mary's Ladies College, then at St Vincent's College, Potts Point. She completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at Sydney University in 1943.

She joined the Herald briefly after her return from London, working with Myfanwy Gollan, who was to marry Donald Horne. At Myfanwy's suggestion, Horne poached her from the Herald to join The Bulletin after Frank Packer bought it in 1961.

Horne wrote in his memoirs: "I knew her from a continuing lunchtime experience in London, ending seven years before, when over a prix fixe meal in a French restaurant near Fleet Street, we would ascend to a great and confident height and look down on the affairs of the world. I knew Pat would bring our amused looking-down style to The Bulletin."

Rolfe's time with The Bulletin coincided with some of its heady days, when circulation increased and the long lunch was obligatory - so much so that Pat christened it "the New Hellas school of journalism", marking the importance of the regular gatherings at the Greek restaurant near the ACP building.

The magazine chronicled a time of enormous social change. Daphne Guinness, among many who called Rolfe a mentor, recalled having a drink with Rolfe at the Wentworth Hotel in the mid-1960s, when the maitre d' inquired if they were accompanied by any gentlemen. On conceding that they were two women alone, they were escorted out. Management thought they were prostitutes there to pick up business. Rolfe wrote about the experience and the hotel quickly changed its policy to allow women to drink there alone.

When she took the reins as literary editor, she developed a college of reviewers who wrote exclusively for The Bulletin. She would comb through catalogues and international newspapers to find interesting books for the pages and unerringly choose a reviewer who had some personal connection with the material.

She also wrote a weekly book bulletin column, deftly capturing the personality of an author or the quality of a book in only a few hundred words. She was widely regarded as professional, accomplished and a good judge of journalistic quality, although Bob Carr thought some of her criticism could be tart.

Rolfe was also a skilled writer of fiction. She won £20 in the Herald's literary competition in 1947 and in 1965 used her own experiences in Britain to write a novel, No Love Lost, about an Australian in London.

She wrote an illustrated history of The Bulletin, The Journalistic Javelin, to coincide with the magazine's centenary in 1980. When The Bulletin finally closed in January this year, she wasn't nostalgic: "J. F. Archibald [the magazine's founder] said The Bulletin was a clever youth but would become a dull old man. He was certainly right about that."

Rolfe is survived by five nieces, two nephews and their families.

Jennie Curtin