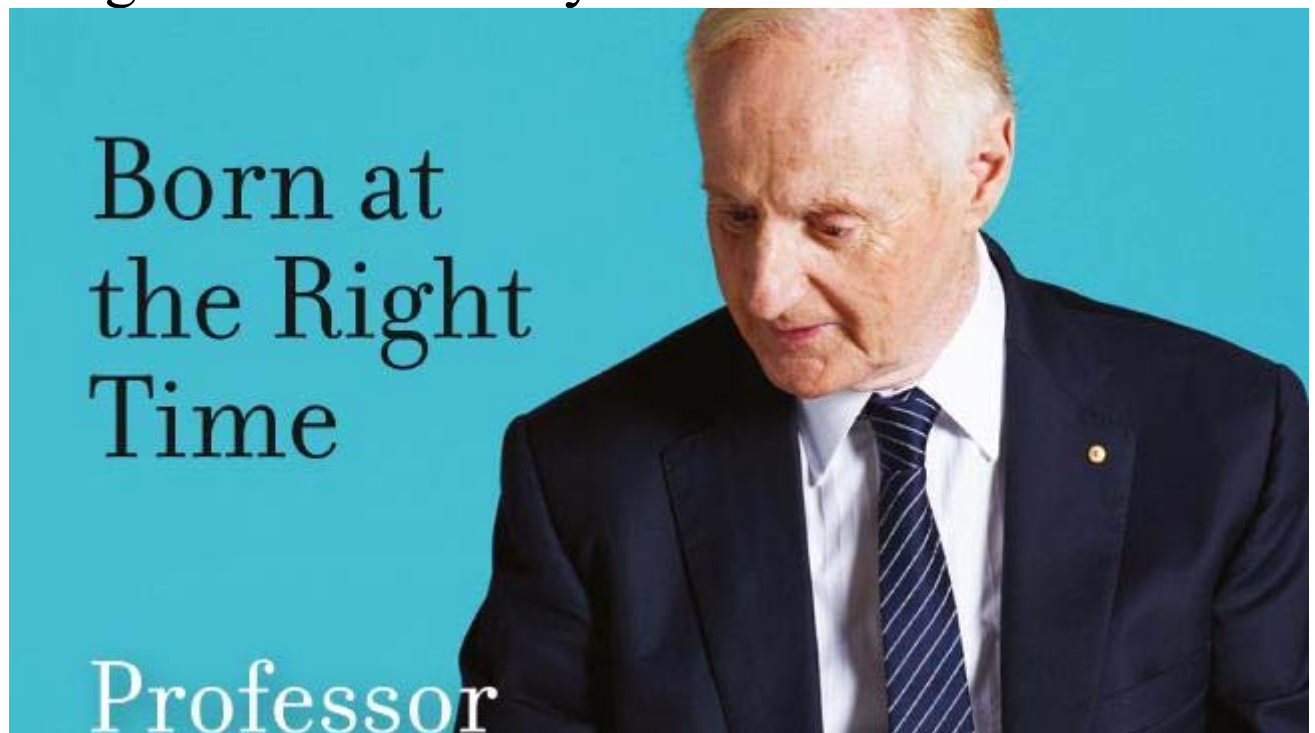


## Insights of a love story



Born at the Right Time by Professor Ron McCallum

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- By TINA ALLEN
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  - NO COMMENTS

Smartphones have revolutionised our lives, including for the sight-impaired. Phone cameras and voiceover apps help people navigate what they cannot see.

The BlindSquare app, for example, reads out the names of shops the user is passing, whereas the Be My Eyes app uses GPS to locate a sighted volunteer.

These are just a few of the assistive apps mentioned by blind emeritus professor of law at the University of Sydney, Ron McCallum, in his moving and revealing memoir, *Born at the Right Time*.

Braille was the only assistive tool available to McCallum, now 71, when he was growing up in Melbourne. Born eight to 10 weeks early, he was blinded by the pure oxygen pumped into the humidicrib used to help his laboured breathing.

McCallum sometimes wonders how he became dean of the Sydney University Law School or was chosen to be president of a UN committee on human rights, considering his “less-than-auspicious beginnings”.

His family of five lived in a two-bedroom housing commission home. One of his early memories is of his father swearing at and pushing his mother, “sometimes knocking her to the floor”. The residential blind primary school he attended was an escape from tension at home.

The “shadows of the men making baskets in the sheltered workshop” next to his primary school would haunt his senior years of mainstream high school where he worked solidly towards university entrance.

Tabletop reel-to-reel tape recorders, like the one purchased for him by his beloved mother in Year 12, became his workhorses for the next quarter of a century, throughout his law degree and subsequent academic career at Monash University in the 60s and 70s.

Labour law fitted him “like a glove” because it “brought together law, history, politics and social justice”.

“What struck me about labour law was its fairness, its view that we should be looking after everyone in the community ... A country that has fair and just places of work is usually a happy and productive nation.”

He is grateful to the many volunteers, including family, friends, fellow students and even prisoners, who helped him by reading textbooks and legal cases onto tape recorders.

Few sighted people would appreciate the hours and hours it took McCallum to listen to these tapes so he could memorise a paper or lecture and then type it into a conventional typewriter.

There is a searing honesty in how he describes the hardships and loneliness he encountered as a single man. He writes that he hopes his book will “remove the mystery and misunderstandings” about how blind people lead their everyday lives.

McCallum never expected to find a life partner and spent most evenings on his own. Fourteen-hour days left “very few moments free for nurturing relationships”.

That loneliness changed for ever in August 1984, when 35-year-old MacCallum “heard a beautiful mellow voice from across the table” at a dinner party and walked around to introduce himself to Mary Crock, a 25-year-old lawyer.

Their love story is the centrepiece of *Born at the Right Time*.

Before he met Crock, McCallum felt like an outsider but now, holding her hand, he stood at “centre stage in our society”.

Perhaps because he never expected them to happen, he devotes whole chapters to “Marriage” and “Becoming a Father”, where he recounts tactile joys such as the “billows and flounces” of his wife’s wedding dress and the changes in the “shape and texture” of her pregnant body.

The clarity of the writing and lack of legalese will make this memoir appealing to a wide audience.

McCallum never wanted his wife to just look after him, so the timing was perfect for the “computer-based assistive technology that sprang forth at this time”. The year he met Crock, McCallum also came across his first Apple computer and when their first child was born three years later in 1987, they paid \$4000 to purchase a text-to-speech computer, the “Keynote Gold”.

In the early 1990s, when McCallum was appointed a full professor at the University of Sydney – a first for a totally blind person in any faculty across Australia and New Zealand – legal materials started to appear on the internet. Crock would soon join McCallum at the University of Sydney Faculty of Law.

McCallum believes he was born at the right place at the right time.

Assistive technology has allowed him a degree of independence that has strengthened his marriage to Crock by giving her the space she needed to fulfil her own dreams and work in the same field of legal academia.

Tina Allen is a medical writer and medical scientist. Her first book is Bill Gibson: Pioneering Bionic Ear Surgeon.

Born at the Right Time: A Memoir

By Ron McCallum. Allen & Unwin, 226pp, \$29.99