

Information Sheet No. 16



Heritage Services

Geraldton Regional Library

EDITH COWAN OBE – First Woman Elected to Parliament in Western Australia

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| 1861, Aug 2 | - Born at Glengarry Station near Geraldton, WA. |
| 1868 | - Death of her mother, Mary Eliza Brown. Sent to Perth as a boarder. |
| 1879, Nov 12 | - Married James Cowan, Perth. |
| 1894 | - Founding member of the Karrakatta Club. |
| 1906 | - Founding member of the Children's Protection Society. |
| 1909 | - Helped form the Women's Service Guild. |
| 1913-1921 | - President, National Council of Women in WA. |
| 1915 | - Appointed to sit on the Children's Court. |
| 1920 | - Awarded the Order of the British Empire. |
| 1921, Dec 3 | - Elected to Parliament. |
| 1924 | - Lost her seat in Parliament. |
| 1932, Jun 9 | - Died in Perth, WA. |



Edith Cowan. Photo courtesy of Geraldton Historical Society, P 75.

It is unlikely that Geraldton held many fond memories for Edith Cowan. Born the daughter of Kenneth and Mary Brown on their pleasant pastoral property, Glengarry, her idyllic childhood was shattered by the death of her mother, her father's remarriage, his alcoholism, the murder of her stepmother and the subsequent hanging of her father.

Edith was sent as a boarder to Cowan's School in Perth. On completion of her studies she married James Cowan, the brother of the proprietors. They raised four daughters and a son.

In 1890, James Cowan was appointed Police Magistrate and Magistrate of the Local Court at Perth and Edith began her long involvement with voluntary organisations. For close to 30 years, she was a leader in the majority of social welfare and women's rights organisations in Western Australia.

For her dedication to the war effort during the First World War, Edith Cowan was awarded an OBE. Women were granted the right to sit in Parliament in 1920. The following year Edith Cowan stood as Nationalist Party representative for the Legislative Assembly seat of West Perth. She defeated the Attorney-General, Thomas Draper (the man responsible for the Act which allowed women to sit in Parliament) and took her seat as the first woman member of an Australian parliament. Despite much opposition in parliament she pursued women's interests with dignity and determination. Edith Cowan promoted migrant welfare, infant health centres and women's rights, and pressed for sex education to be taught in State schools. One of her private member's bills gave women the right to enter the legal profession.

Despite her successes, Edith Cowan was defeated in the 1924 elections.

After her death in 1932, colleagues erected a clock tower memorial at the entrance to King's Park, to commemorate her achievements. Then in 1991, the Western Australian College of Advanced Education was re-named Edith Cowan University in her honor.

References

*Text taken from **Geraldton: 150 Years, 150 Lives**, Local Studies Department, Geraldton Regional Library, 2001, p. 39.*

Copies are available from the Library, 37 Marine Terrace, Geraldton (PO Box 101, Geraldton, WA, 6531) for \$27.50 (plus \$6.50 postage and handling).

