Women's Firsts Portraits: Edith Cowan
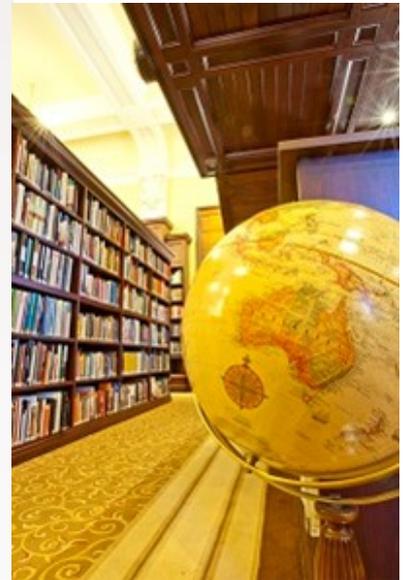
Edith Cowan
Photograph: Parliament of Western Australia

Edith Cowan

Edith Cowan was the first woman parliamentarian in Australia. She was also the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. Cowan was elected on 12 March 1921, the year after Western Australia allowed women parliamentary representation, to represent the West Perth electorate as a Nationalist. Cowan won the seat by 46 votes. Ironically, she defeated the man who had fought for the right of women to enter parliament. The distinction of being the nation's first woman Australian parliamentarian gave Cowan much prominence, including representation on Australia's $50 note and the naming of Edith Cowan University.

Mitchell's government recognised the 'symbolic significance of her presence' and gave Edith Cowan the honour of moving the Address-in-Reply speech (annual response to the Governor's opening of parliament). On Thursday 28 July 1921, Mrs Cowan, Member for West Perth gave her maiden speech: 'a unique position' to the Legislative Assembly:

'I know many people think perhaps that it was not the wisest thing to send a woman into Parliament, and perhaps I should remind hon. members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable to do so, was because it was felt that men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home'.

Some of the MPs in the chamber did not respect the historic occasion and frequently interrupted Cowan, contrary to the usual custom for inaugural speeches. Cowan was an 'extremely active parliamentarian' and contributed robustly to debates and the legislative process in parliament. She advocated strongly for women's rights, migrant welfare, infant health centres, child endowment and sex education in schools. Cowan was responsible for two Private Member's Bills which both passed through parliament. The Administration Act Amendment Bill gave equal inheritance rights to mothers when children died intestate. In 1923, she introduced a second bill that was radical for the time. The Women's Legal Status Bill stated that 'A person shall not be disqualified by sex from the exercise of any public function...' The bill was passed without amendment. It allowed women in Western Australia to practise law and other professions for the first time. It was very rare for significant Private Members Bills to be successful, especially those proposed by an inexperienced parliamentarian. She recontested her West Perth seat at the 1924 and 1927 elections, but she was unsuccessful.

Edith Dircksey Brown was born on 2 August 1861 at Glengarry, near Geraldton, the second child of pastoralist, Kenneth Brown and Mary Brown, nee Wittenoom, a teacher and daughter of the colony's first chaplain, Reverend John B Wittenoom. Their family was 'well-connected, pious, and conservative'. Tragically, Edith's mother died giving birth to her sixth child in 1868. Edith, then aged seven years, and her sister, Blanche were sent to Perth for their education. She was educated at Misses Cowan's (sisters of her future husband) school in Perth. A second tragedy struck in 1876, when her depressed father shot his second wife during an argument. He was charged with murder and executed. After her father's death, Edith left boarding school and moved to Guildford. She attended the school of Canon Sweeting whose tuition gave Edith a conviction in the value of education and an interest in reading. In 1879, she married James Cowan at St George's Cathedral in Perth and they had five children. Cowan was an active member of over 40 community organisations, and in 1909 helped found the Women's Service Guild which led to the opening of King Edward Memorial Hospital in 1916. In 1939, she received an OBE for her work with the Red Cross during World War I. Cowan died on 9 June 1932 at Subiaco and is buried at Karrakatta Cemetery, Western Australia.

Bibliography

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