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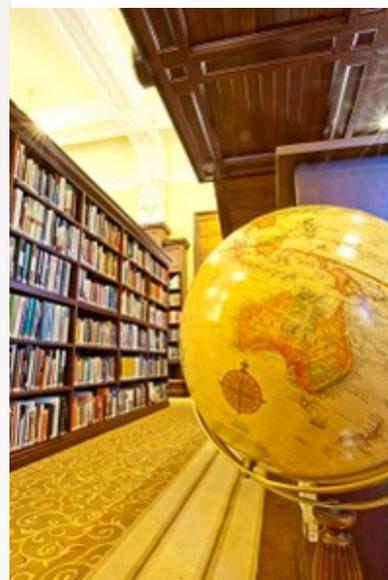
History Notes: Women's Firsts Portraits—May Holman
September 2022

Women's Firsts Portraits: May Holman



May Holman

Photograph: Parliament of Western Australia



May Holman

May Holman was the first woman Labor parliamentarian in Western Australia, Australia and the Commonwealth. She was only the second woman member of parliament in Australia after Edith Cowan. She was elected to the seat of Forrest in the WA Parliament at a by-election on 3 April 1925. Holman's father had held the seat until his death. May Holman was endorsed over nine men for her father's safe seat. Holman was re-elected four times and was the first woman in the British Empire to serve in a parliament for more than ten years.

Holman was not a regular speaker in parliament, however she advocated strongly for the timber workers, and the women and children of her electorate. She supported raising the school leaving age to 16 years, child endowment, equal pay and better conditions for female servants. In 1938, she instigated a Royal Commission into sanitation, slum clearance, and health and housing regulations in Perth. When May Holman died tragically in 1939, her brother, Ted Holman won her seat of Forrest, which meant three members of the same family consecutively held the seat of Forrest.

Holman was heavily involved in the Labor movement holding the positions of president and secretary of the Labor Women's Central Executive from 1927 to 1939. She was also president of Perth Labor Women and secretary for the Parliamentary Labor Party from 1933 until 1939. As a gifted musician, in 1935 she founded and conducted the Labor Choral Union. Holman's mother, Katherine Holman was an active member of Labor women's organisations in Perth. Her father, Jack Holman was a unionist and Labor MLA for Forrest from 1901-1921 and 1923-1925.

Mary Alice Holman was born on 18 July 1893 in Broken Hill, NSW. She was the daughter of John (Jack), miner, and his wife, Katherine Mary Holman (nee Row), the first of their 11 children. In the same year, Jack Holman moved to Cue, in the goldfields of the Murchison, Western Australia. In 1895, his wife and daughter, May joined him. May was educated at convents in Cue, Dongara and Perth. In 1905, the family moved to the Perth metropolitan area. May's first job was as a typist at Trades Hall. In 1914, she started working for the Westralian Worker. In the same year, she secretly married Joseph Gardiner, who was the Member for Roebourne from 1911 to 1915, at the Perth District Registry Office. Holman's father was opposed to the marriage and the couple divorced in 1920. Around 1915, she worked on a farm as a cook and farmhand. She was also a pianist at cinemas and was in a Pierrot show in Kalgoorlie in 1917. After 1918, May worked with her father as a clerk and bookkeeper with the Timber Workers' Union. She also worked in arbitration, including nine months at the Victorian Arbitration Court. In 1920, her parents bought a rambling ten acre property at 3 Ida St, Bassendean. When May's father died in 1925, she was briefly acting secretary for the Timber Workers' Union.

May Holman represented the Forrest Division until her death on 20 March 1939, following a car accident. She was campaigning for re-election in the south-west with her sister as the driver. She had just been re-elected for a fifth term two days before her death. Holman died in St John of God Hospital, Bunbury. Thousands of people attended her funeral at Karrakatta Cemetery where she was buried in the Roman Catholic section. The Superannuation Building, 32 St George's Terrace, Perth was named the May Holman Centre in her honour in 1985, but was renamed Golden Square in 2015 when purchased by a private company. In 2019, 189 Royal Street, East Perth, which houses the departments of Communities and Health, was named the May Holman Building.

Bibliography

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