

History Notes: Holman Dynasty
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Holman Dynasty

May Holman: First Labor Woman MP

May Holman was the first female Labor parliamentarian in Australia and the Commonwealth. She was only the second woman member of parliament in Australia after Edith Cowan. Holman was the first woman in the British Empire to serve parliament for more than 10 years. Her 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. In 1914, May Holman married Joseph Gardiner, who was the Member for Roebourne from 1911 to 1915. In 1925, May's father, Jack died and for a short time she acted in his role as secretary of the Timber Workers' Union. May was endorsed over nine men for her father's safe seat of Forrest and on 3 April 1925 she won the by-election. 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.



[Politician Mary Holman, New South Wales, ca. 1930s](#)

Photograph courtesy of Trove



"I hope that... the unique record of Miss Holman will be an inspiration, and that it will encourage many women of her kind to assist in the magnificent work she is doing for the people"

The Hon Philip Collier,
Former Premier
On the 10th anniversary
of May Holman's election



[Studio portrait of May Holman](#), (1916)

Photograph courtesy of
State Library: BA1011/3143

Broken Hill to Bassendean

May Holman was born Mary Alice Holman 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. From 1914 she worked for the

Westralian Worker. 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 10 acre property at 3 Ida St, Bassendean. When May's father died in 1925, she was briefly acting secretary for the Timber Workers' Union.

Secret marriage

On 9 May 1914, May Holman secretly married Joseph Gardiner at the District Registry Office in Perth. When her father found out he put an axe through the table holding her 21st birthday presents at a packed hall in Mt Lawley. Holman and Gardiner never lived together and divorced in 1920. Gardiner was the member for Roebourne from 1911 to 1915. The seat was declared vacant due to his non-attendance. He left for Adelaide in 1915. He had a variety of jobs including apprentice boot-maker, hotel manager, labourer and journalist.



[Studio portraits of May Holman](#), (ca 1917)

Photograph courtesy of State Library: BA1011/3453

Labor family

May Holman was a committed member of the Labor family. At age 13 she organised a benefit concert for locked out workers during a timber industry dispute. By 19 years she was the official recorder of the first Labor Women's conference. Holman was the first president of Perth Labor Women, and president and secretary of the Labor Women's Central Executive from 1927 to 1939. She was the first woman to be elected as secretary to the Labor Party caucus. May was also the first woman to be a proxy delegate to the League of Nations meeting in Geneva, 1930.

Jack: 'stormy petrel from the Murchison'

May Holman's father, John (Jack) Barkell Holman was born in Clunes, Victoria on 26 February 1872. He was the son of a miner and educated in Bendigo. He worked on mines in Broken Hill. In 1893 he married Katherine Mary Row and then moved to Cue, Western Australia. They had 11 children. In 1896 he was a leader in the Day Dawn strike, a protest against a wage cut. By 1901 he was a journalist and a union organiser for the Amalgamated Workers' Union. The same year he contested the seat of Mt Magnet and finally won the seat of North Murchison in a by-election. He was Minister for Railways and Labour from 1904-1905 and Secretary and Whip for the Parliamentary Labor Party. In 1921 Jack Holman resigned the seat of Murchison to stand for Swan but he lost to Richard Stanley Sampson, newspaper owner. In another by-election on 8 December 1923, he won the seat of Forrest. In 1925 Jack Holman died of complications following an appendectomy at the St John of God Hospital in Subiaco.

"I wish to say how honoured I feel that the electors of Forrest have put me in the position formerly held by my father."
Miss Holman's inaugural speech, WA Parliamentary Debates

Portrait of Holman family posing on the front verandah of 3 Ida Street (c. 1926?)

Back row: L to R: Sheila, John, Win, Ted, Iris, Bill.

Front row: L to R: Eileen, Maud, Katherine, May.

Photograph courtesy of Bassendean Memorial Library: P817



Edward (Ted) Joseph Frederick Holman

May Holman's younger brother Edward (Ted) Joseph Frederick was born in Cue in 1904. He was educated at Christian Brothers' College in Highgate Hill and Perth and St Ildephonsus College, New Norcia. After school he entered the printing trade. As a union leader he won a 40 hour week for his 'employees'. Ted married Mildred Payne in 1928 at St Joseph's Church, Bassendean. They had two daughters. He contested the seat of North Perth in 1936 and 1939 as well as the Australian Senate in 1934. He won the seat of Forrest in a by-election following the death of his sister. In his parliamentary inaugural speech he said he would thank his electorate by following his sister's good example. He held the seat until 1947. In 1941 he enlisted for the Australian Imperial Force serving with the 2/16 Battalion in the Middle East. Following time in hospital he was discharged. In his retirement Ted lived in Bassendean.



MR. J. B. HOLMAN, M.L.A.,
An Anti-Unionist.

[The Battle of Bunbury: Jack Holman Elated](#)

Photograph courtesy of Trove

Entertainers

May Holman was a talented musician and gifted singer. She achieved licentiate in singing and pianoforte. May organised choirs including the Labor Choral Union. She also performed in concerts, plays, balls and fetes. With her sisters and brother, Ted she formed a band, The Entertainers. The band played all over Western Australia raising thousands of pounds for charities and the Labor movement.

Ted Holman also formed a band which was called the Broadway and he joined The Black Cat Orchestra founded by Rita North, the accompanist in his group.

Tragedy

May Holman died aged 45 years on 20 March 1939 three days after a car accident on election eve. Holman's sister, Iris (Cis) was driving the car. Holman was re-elected for a fifth term for the seat of Forrest. She died at the St John of God Hospital in Bunbury, WA. A requiem mass was held at St Mary's Cathedral, Perth. There were numerous tributes and obituaries after her death. John Curtin, Opposition Leader and friend said that 'all of us were stunned by a sense of overwhelming loss'. May Holman is buried at Karrakatta Cemetery.



State Library of Western Australia

[Funeral of May Holman, 22 March 1939](#)

Published in the *Western Mail* newspaper, 30 March 1939

Photograph courtesy of the State Library of WA: BA1555/254.2

Her memory will have a precious place in the annals of our cause

John Curtin, Leader, Federal Labor Party

Sources

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