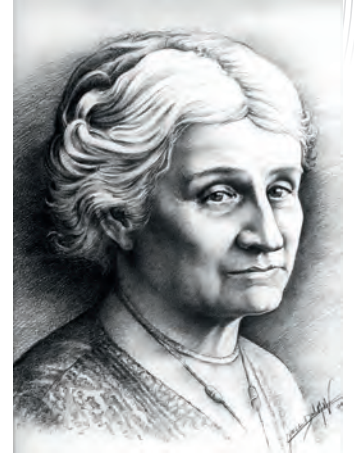




Edith Cowan (1861–1932)

Social worker, politician and feminist.

Edith Cowan's schooling gave her a lifelong conviction of the value of education. She served several terms on the North Fremantle Education Board. She advocated for state schooling and for the inclusion of sex education in the curriculum. She was also a dedicated campaigner for women's rights and for the protection of children. In more recent times, a federal electorate and a university have been named after her.



1861: Edith Dircksey Cowan (nee Brown) was born on 2 August 1861 at Glengarry near Geraldton in Western Australia, the second child of pastoralist Kenneth Brown and teacher Mary Eliza Dircksey Wittenoom.

1868: Her childhood was marred by personal tragedy. When she was seven, her mother died in childbirth.

1876: Eight years after her mother's death, her father, suffering from illness and jealousy, murdered his second wife.

1879: On 12 November 1879, Edith married James Cowan at St George's Cathedral, Perth.

1880–1891: Edith and James Cowan had four daughters and a son.

1890: Her husband's work as Perth police magistrate from 1890 gave Cowan an insight into the problems of women and children, reinforcing her interest in social reform.

1891: From 1891, Cowan worked for the Ministering Children's League.

1893: From 1893, Cowan worked for the House of Mercy for unmarried mothers (later the Alexandra Home for Women).

1894: She became the first secretary of the Karrakatta Club, a forum for discussion of women's rights, current affairs, literature and other topics, later becoming its vice-president and president.

1906: She was a foundation member of the Children's Protection Society, through which her hope for the establishment of day nurseries for the children of working mothers was realised.

1907: The Society lobbied successfully for the passing of the State Children's Act, which established the Children's Court.

1909–1917: She was one of the founders of the Women's Service Guild and was vice-president until 1917. One of the aims of the Guild was to establish equal rights of citizenship for both men and women.

1911: Cowan was involved in the creation of the Western Australian branch of the National Council of Women.

1913–1921: She served as president of the Western Australian National Council of Women.

1914: Cowan was a founding member of the Red Cross and also worked with other humanitarian organisations during World War I.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Call
1800 633 220 (8.30 am – 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday)

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1915: Cowan was one of the first women appointed to the Children's Court bench. Proposed amendments to the Health Act caused a division in the women's movement and Cowan was prominent in the controversy. She supported clauses recommending compulsory notification of venereal disease.

1916: The Women's Service Guild was instrumental in opening the King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women. Cowan was the first female member of the Anglican Social Questions Committee.

1920: She was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. Cowan also became one of the first female Justices of the Peace.

1921: Cowan was a strong campaigner for women's democratic rights to enter Parliament. With legislation enacted in 1920 to remove the legal bar to women entering Parliament, Cowan stood for the 1921 state election. She became a member of the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia and the first female member of any Australian parliament. She used her term to promote women's rights, migrant welfare and infant health centres. Through a private member's bill, Cowan was successful in amending the Administration Act to give equal inheritance rights to mothers when children died intestate. She was the vice-president of the Western Australian National Council of Women from 1921 until her death in 1932.

1922: She served as vice-president for the Children's Protection Society from 1922 to 1932.

1923: Cowan was a co-opted member of Synod from 1923. The legal profession was opened to women as a result of her second successful private member's bill, which became the Women's Legal Status Act of 1923.

1924: Cowan lost her seat in Parliament.

1925: Cowan was an Australian delegate to the 1925 International Conference of Women held in the United States.

1926: She helped to found the Western Australian Historical Society.

1927: She failed to regain her seat in Parliament again.

1929: She was active in planning the state's 1929 Centenary celebrations.

1932: Cowan died on 9 June 1932.

1934: A memorial clock tower at the entrance to Kings Park in Perth was created in her honour.

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