Politician and Social Worker

EDITH COWAN
(1861-1932)

Edith Cowan was born in 1861 at Glengarry, near Geraldton, Western Australia. At a time when women did not attend universities or have the right to vote, she was a political force to be reckoned with. Edith quickly developed her political reputation in the 1880s. She was involved in many organisations including the founding of the Karrakatta Club, Australia’s first women’s social club. Edith was also a member of the suffragette movement which saw women in WA granted the right to vote in 1899.

Edith was foremost community-minded, and during World War I she was chairperson of the Red Cross Appeal Committee. In 1920 she was appointed to the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to the war effort. In the same year, a Bill was passed in WA giving women the right to run for parliament. Edith jumped at the opportunity and in 1921 was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia as a member of the Nationalist Party, becoming Australia’s first female parliamentarian – a dream come true for our stalwart suffragette!

Edith’s most notable achievement in parliament was her contribution to the passing of the Women’s Legal Status Bill, which opened legal and other professions to Western Australian women for the first time.

Up until her death in 1932, Edith championed women’s rights, migrant welfare, social justice and infant health. Since 1995 Edith’s portrait has been printed on the $50 note in celebration of her exceptional achievements.

Edith, you’re a pioneer of our modern society and you’re inspiring girls across Australia and the world to improve their communities and aspire to higher ideals.

We salute your devotion and drive!

Illustration by Marcela Redrepo