

## **Podcast 128 - Edith Cowan - Early Campaigner for Women's Rights**

**by Rob McCormack - Tuesday, May 04, 2021**

<https://slowenglish.info/podcast-128-edith-cowan-early-campaigner-for-womens-rights/>

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*Podcast Number 128 – Edith Cowan – Early Campaigner for Women’s Rights*

<https://traffic.libsyn.com/secure/slowenglish/podcast128.mp3>

(This podcast is 14 minutes and 55 seconds long)

Hi,

Since European colonisation in the late 1700s, Australia’s recorded history has been a story of leaders, explorers, hard workers and risk takers. Almost all of the famous Australians from our history have been men. That’s because Australia, like most developed societies, is patriarchal. This means that, in our society, men have traditionally occupied nearly all of the positions of power and influence. This does not mean that women have not played an important role in our society, but rather that the leadership roles have been occupied largely by men. But things have been changing in this regard for a while in Australia. It was in the late 1800s and in the early 1900s that equality for women first started to develop. In this podcast, I would like to tell you a little about Edith Cowan, one of our early advocates for the role of women in our society.



Edith Cowan - taken

around 1900

Edith Cowan was born in 1861 and became a strong advocate for women's and children's welfare. She also believed strongly in the value of education and in better supporting the lives of women and children. Importantly, in 1921, she became the first female elected to a Parliament in Australia, in her case to the state parliament of Western Australia. The importance of her contribution is shown by the fact that Edith's picture is on our \$50 note.



Edith Cowan shown on Australia's \$50 note.

What's more, the Edith Cowan University in Western Australia is named after her.

<https://www.ecu.edu.au/>. Today, equality for women continues to be an important issue and is still moving forward. We still have a long way to go, but things are improving, albeit slowly. It was only in 2010 that Australia had its first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, who was our country's leader from 2010 to 2013. It was pioneers like Edith Cowan who laid the groundwork for more women to take on leadership roles in our society.

Edith was born in 1861 at Glengarry in Western Australia, near the town of Geraldton, which is 415 kilometres north of Perth, the capital of Western Australia. Her childhood had many challenges and these must have had a big impact on her values and her later life. In 1868, her mother died in childbirth when Edith was just 7 years old. Her father was unable to look after her and so she was sent to a boarding school in Perth. For a 7 year old, it must have been traumatic to lose her mother. Added to that, it must have been very hard to be sent away to a strange city to be brought up by people she didn't know. But more trauma was to come. Edith's father remarried and things didn't work out well. In 1876 he shot and killed his second wife following an argument. He was charged with murder and was found guilty. He was hanged for his crime in that same year. So at the age of 15 years, Edith became an orphan. She was removed from the boarding school and sent to live with her grandmother who cared for her and made sure that her education was completed. Her remaining education was supervised by a clergyman, Canon Sweeting, who knew the value of education and must have been very important in instilling the same ideas into Edith. As she became a young woman, she developed beliefs and values which would make her one of the most influential and important women in Australia during the first 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At the age of 17 in 1879, she married James Cowan, an important official in the Supreme Court of



Western Australia. He subsequently became a magistrate in the court system and, through his role, Edith was able to see for herself the problems in society, especially concerning women and children. In the period from 1880 to 1891, Edith and James had 5 children of their own. It was following her child-bearing years, beginning in the early 1890s, that Edith became an active social reformer on behalf of women and children. This was not easy at the time, as women were almost totally excluded from any public positions of power or influence. Initially, she was actively involved in the creation of the Karrakatta Women's Club, the first women's club in Australia. The aim of the club was to bring women together for their own improvement through reading and discussion, in particular related to health and women's rights. A key aim was the social improvement and support of women. Edith was the first secretary and suggested the club's motto, which means 'Let us be judged by our actions'. You can see from this motto that they were determined to bring about real improvement in the lives of women. In this regard, Edith was a great achiever. The Karrakatta Women's Club still exists today.

<https://www.karrakattaclub.com.au/>

She worked actively for improved education by serving as a member of her local Board of Education, one of the few public positions open to women at the time. From the early 1890s, she was also actively involved in organisations which helped disadvantaged children and unmarried mothers and their babies. As a foundation member of the Children's Protection Society in Western Australia in 1906, she helped set up the first day nursery for the children of working mothers. While child care services are common today, in the early 1900s this was not the case. Edith, as part of this group, then played an important role in getting the law changed, so that children who broke the law would have their cases heard and decided in a separate court from the adults. This became the Children's Court and it meant that children aged from 10-17 who broke the law could be given every chance to get their lives back on track. Today, a Children's Court operates in all states of Australia and plays a key role in helping keep children out of trouble.

Edith was one of the founders of the Women's Service Guild in 1909. This organisation also focussed on improving the welfare of both women and children. Along with other women in this organisation, Edith undertook fundraising, held public meetings and lobbied the government for the building of a hospital for women. This resulted in the opening of the King Edward Memorial Hospital in Perth in 1916. This hospital is still operating successfully today. <https://www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/>.

Edith was also involved in the struggle to allow women to serve in parliament, which was finally achieved in 1920 in Western Australia. In the 1921 elections, Edith was elected to the Parliament in Western Australia, the first woman in Australia to be elected. Her most important achievement was a law called the Women's Legal Status Act, which finally allowed women to enter the legal profession as lawyers in Western Australia in 1923.

Edith was not able to get re-elected to Parliament, however she continued to be active as a reformer and advocate for women's issues. She died in 1932 at the age of 70.

She never reached great wealth during her life, but her legacy for women and children has been enormous. The efforts and achievements of Edith Cowan in the early 1900s are very impressive, given that, at that time, men on the whole did not respect or encourage an active and equal role for women in our society. That she was able to persist against strong opposition at the time, is indeed inspiring, not only for the women of today, but also for all Australians. It's great that she is now recognised and respected

for the powerful contribution which she made during her lifetime.

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at [rob@slowenglish.info](mailto:rob@slowenglish.info). I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

[WpProQuiz 132]

### Vocabulary

- = someone who gets things done
- = (noun) persons who speak in favour of something
- = (verb) when a person speaks in favour of something
- = although
- = when people disagree about something
- = to return to the right path (after you have lost your way)
- = a school where you also have a place to sleep and eat
- = being looked after by someone when you are a child
- = someone who argues for a change
- = (noun) things that may stop you from being successful
- = when the police say you have done something bad, against the law
- = the years when a woman has children
- = the process of having a child
- = when a foreign country takes control over another region
- = relating to, affecting, about

- = still going
- = what you have done for others
- = (here) when you really want to do something
- = where society is advanced, wealthy
- = poor, when you don't have the same things as other people
- = to talk about something
- = learning which happens at school
- = to be chosen in a vote
- = when you are chosen by the people in a vote
- = to help someone to do something
- = very large
- = when two things or people are equal, the same
- = left out, not included
- = people who go to places where no-one has been before
- = the first member of a group when it was formed
- = to ask others for money so that you can help others in need
- = when a court finds you have broken the law
- = when a rope is put around your neck and you are hung from above (means death)
- = effect
- = when something is very, very good
- = when you are talking about something stated previously
- = able to control leaders when they make decisions which affect many people
- = when you are able to influence someone or a decision

- = when someone, by example, makes you think that you can do a difficult job
- = to make someone understand and believe something
- = (here) when you decide if someone is good or bad
- = to prepare the way for others to follow
- = people who know about the law and can help others when they have broken the law
- = the good things you have done which stay after you die
- = lawyers and judges who work in a court
- = a type of judge, who decides what punishment a criminal will get
- = a saying which everyone agrees with, about how people will act
- = when someone or something is given the same name as another person
- = a place where babies or young children are looked after
- = to be in place, to be in control
- = (noun) a person who is in a position of power or decision making
- = (here) working, going
- = those who try to stop you from doing something
- = a child whose parents are both dead
- = a place where politicians meet to make decisions
- = to keep on doing something even though it is hard
- = the people who did something first, before others have done it
- = the ability to make decisions affecting many people
- = written down
- = someone who wants to change things for the better
- = when there is a chance something bad may happen to you

= (here) a leader in a club who usually makes records about decisions the club makes

= (here) different

= (here) doing a job

= to be hit by a bullet from a gun

= a hard effort

= following, after

= when someone watches over someone or something to make sure it works correctly

= a place where a judge decides you are guilty or innocent of a crime

= has been in place for a long time

= (noun) an event or experience which has a bad effect on someone

= having a bad effect on someone

= the things you believe are important or right

= the well-being, the health, the safety

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