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The \$50 polymer banknote featuring Edith Cowan was first issued on 4 October 1995. Note the colonial image of the Parliament of Western Australia in the top left hand corner. Image courtesy of the Reserve Bank

Cowan honoured in stone and polymer

Edith Cowan's significant work and commitment to improving the welfare of Western Australian women and children has been recognised in many ways. The oldest and most famous commemoration is the Edith Cowan Memorial Clock which was organised by her colleagues to recognise her place as 'one of Australia's great women'. It was unveiled on a wintry day in 1934 by Sir James Mitchell in King's Park. It is located at the corner of Kings Park Road and Fraser Avenue, Perth. The memorial was the first civic monument to honour an Australian woman.

In 1975 she was featured in a stamp collection to commemorate six famous Australian women. In 1979 a plaque dedicated to her was laid in St Georges Terrace, Perth, to commemorate the State's 150th anniversary and a plaque was placed in St George's Cathedral in 1996.

In 1984 the federal electoral seat of Cowan in Western Australia was named after her. In 1991 the new university,

Edith Cowan University was named in her honour. It was the first university in Australia to be named after a woman.

In 1995 Edith Cowan was chosen to appear on the new \$50 bank note issued by the Reserve Bank of Australia. She was included in the Historical Walk Trail established at the Karrakatta Cemetery in 1996.

Cowan has been the subject of exhibitions, such as **Women in Law**, a permanent exhibition at the Francis Burt Law Education Centre in Perth, and in 1996 there was a national touring exhibition organised by Edith Cowan University entitled: **A Tough Nut to Crack**. The title was a reference to Edith's cracked gumnut brooches given to her supporters.

The Parliament of Western Australia has also honoured [Edith Cowan](#) with a special webpage which was created specially for Perth Heritage Day.



Edith Cowan Memorial
 Photograph courtesy of [Lorraine Horsley](#) ABC



Memorial Plaque in St George's Cathedral, Perth.
 Photograph courtesy of [Michael Coghlan](#), Flickr

Off the Shelf: Edith Cowan Special Edition



Is this the first multi-tasking cartoon? When Edith Cowan was elected to parliament she was frequently the subject of satire in newspapers and magazines.

From Leason's cartoon entitled: 'The New "House" Wife' In **Bulletin**, 31/3/1921. Courtesy National Library of Australia

First Woman Parliamentarian in Australia

Edith Cowan was the first female member of an Australian parliament and only the second woman elected to a British Imperial Parliament. The distinction of being the nation's first woman parliamentarian has given Cowan much prominence, including representation on Australia's \$50 note.

In 1921, one year after Western Australia allowed women parliamentary representation, Edith Cowan stood as the endorsed Nationalist candidate for the Legislative Assembly seat of West Perth. Cowan had always argued for women to be part of public life not just their right to it. She was one of five women candidates standing against TP Draper, the sitting independent Nationalist Attorney General in the Mitchell Government. The West Perth seat had a majority of women constituents. Cowan

campaigns on her impressive community service record, law and order as well as the need 'to nag a little' on social problems. Her platform had many radical measures including state kitchens, child endowment payments to mothers and day nurseries for working mothers with children.

Cowan won the seat by 46 votes. Ironically she defeated the man who had fought for the right of women to enter parliament. The **Westralian Worker** wrote after her victory that "Mrs Cowan is in the remarkable position of being a Conservative, representing a Conservative electorate, who has achieved a revolution in representation".

Edith Cowan used her time in parliament to advocate women's rights, migrant welfare and infant health centres. She argued for child endowment and sex

education in schools. According to historian, Margaret Brown she took literally the Nationalist claim of being an independent party and did not always vote on party lines. This stance was appreciated by no-one. She always voted in a way that would benefit or not discriminate against women and children. Cowan lost the support of her party although she still stood as a Nationalist in the 1924 election. Her opponent was TAL Davy, a solid candidate driven by West Perth business interests. Cowan also had continuing conflict within two of her major women's organisations. Cowan lost the election. She also failed to win the seat in the 1927 election.

Off the Shelf:

Double tragedy in childhood

Edith Cowan was born on 2 August 1861 at Glengarry near Geraldton, Western Australia. She was the second child of Kenneth Brown, pastoralist and Mary Eliza Dircksey née Wittenoom. Edith's mother, Mary was a teacher and daughter of the colony's first chaplain, Reverend John B. Wittenoom. Tragically Edith's mother died giving birth to her sixth child in 1868. Edith then aged seven years and her sister, Blanche were sent to Perth for their education. The boarding school was run by Misses

Cowan, sisters of her future husband.

A second tragedy struck when in 1876 her depressed father shot his second wife during a domestic argument. He was charged with murder and sentenced to hang. After her father's death, Edith left boarding school and moved to Guildford where she attended the school of Canon Sweeting whose tuition left Edith with a conviction in the value of education and an interest in reading.



Mrs J Cowan Photograph courtesy Royal WA Historical Society

Love, marriage and five children

Aged just 18 years, Edith Brown married James Cowan in Perth's St George's Cathedral on 12 November 1879. James was Registrar and Master of the Supreme Court. He had followed in his father, Walkinshaw Cowan's footsteps as Clerk of the Council, appointed 1 July 1874 to 15 January 1879. In 1890 he was appointed Perth Police Magistrate which gave the couple economic security. It also gave Edith an insight into

the wider society's social problems. They had four daughters and a son between 1880 and 1891. Their first daughter, Dircksey Constance was born in 1880, followed by a son, Norman Walkinshaw in 1892 and three other daughters: Hilda Edith 1883, Ida Marion 1885 and Helen May Burdett in 1891. Edith is the great aunt of former WA politician, Hendy Cowan and grandmother of the late writer, Peter Cowan.



Edith Cowan on her wedding day. In [A unique position](#)

Community Service

Edith Cowan was involved in an extraordinary number of community organisations. Cowan co-founded the RSPCA in 1892 with teacher, Miss Best and a reading circle of other women. In 1894 she was the Karrakatta Club's founding secretary and later president. She became a strong social advocate and campaigner for causes associated with improved social justice for women and children. She worked with the Ministering Children's League and the House of Mercy for unmarried

mothers. She also led many social reform organisations including the Children's Protection Society and the National Council of Women. She campaigned for a specialist maternity hospital, (later the King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women). By the late 1890s Cowan was elected to the boards of public entities, such as the Cottesloe Education Board and the Women's Service Guild. She was a founder of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society in 1926 and wrote for its journal.



Mrs JW Bateman and Mrs Edith Cowan, 1929 Photograph courtesy State Library of WA 016504PD

Number 155

Travel, World War I and an OBE

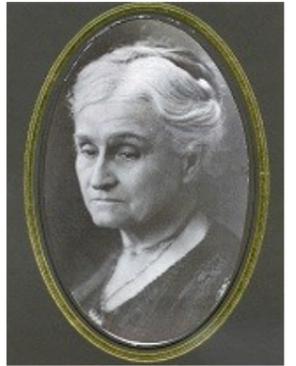
In 1903 and 1912 Edith Cowan went overseas travelling to England and Europe to recover from health problems. Claire Wright in her [online essay](#) on Cowan argues that it may have been depression or exhaustion from her enormous work load. She travelled alone and attended suffragette meetings but did not speak publicly.

Following her husband's retirement she increased her community involvement. In 1915 Edith Cowan and four other

women were appointed to the Children's Court which gave them the right to sit in court. Cowan became one of Western Australia's first female Justices of the Peace in 1920. In 1925 she was delegate to the sixth convention of the International Council in the United States of America. During World War I, though already heavily engaged in social welfare, she took on a wide range of war work. She was on a number of fundraising committees for the Red Cross including chair of the Greater

Perth Red Cross Appeal Committee. She was a founding member of the Red Cross in 1920. She also organised the Soldiers' Welcome Committee. For her war work she was appointed the Order of the British Empire - Officer (Civil) (OBE) in 1920.

Cowan was a strong pro-conscription campaigner during the war and an active member of the Perth recruiting committee.



Edith Cowan, MLA Parliament of Western Australia

“Not the wisest thing to send a woman to parliament”

On Thursday 28 July 1921, Mrs Cowan, Member for West Perth gave her maiden speech: 'a unique position' to the Legislative Assembly: *"I know many people think perhaps that it was not the wisest thing to send a woman into Parliament, and perhaps I should remind hon. members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable to do so, was because it was felt that men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home"*.

Edith Cowan was very mindful of the privilege afforded to her and that she was the first woman elected to Parliament. She was not intimidated by the other elected members, all of whom were men. She had a very specific agenda that she wanted to achieve, namely to improve women's position and to ensure children were provided with the best care. During Edith Cowan's time in parliament she contributed robustly to debates and the legislative process. She was responsible for two Private

Member's Bills. One gave equal inheritance rights to mothers when children died intestate. In 1923 she introduced a second bill. The bill was radical for the time. The Women's Legal Status Bill stated that 'A person shall not be disqualified by sex from the exercise of any public function...' The bill was passed without amendment. It allowed women in Western Australia to practise law and other professions for the first time.

ADDRESS-IN-REPLY.
First Day.
Mrs. COWAN (West Perth) [4.0]: I move—
That the following address be presented to His Excellency in reply to the Speech he has been pleased to deliver to us:—
“May it please Your Excellency. We, the members of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of the State of Western Australia in Parliament assembled, beg to express our loyalty to our Most Gracious Sovereign and to thank Your Excellency for the Speech you have been pleased to deliver to Parliament.”
I have much pleasure in submitting this motion. I stand here to-day in the unique position of being the first woman in an Australian Parliament. I know many people think perhaps that it was not the wisest thing to do to send a woman into Parliament, and perhaps I should remind hon. members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable to do so, was because it was felt that men need a reminder sometimes from women beside them that will make them realise all that can be done for the race and for the home. I have been sent here more from that standpoint than from any other. You, Mr. Speaker, are aware that everybody said when the elections began that there were three old women putting up for Parliament. I am the only old woman who got in, but then I am the only genuine one of the lot.

Mrs Cowan's Inaugural Speech In Western Australian Hansard

Death and Honour

Edith Cowan died aged 70 years on 9 June 1932. She was active with committee and social work until her last illness. Cowan is buried in the Anglican Section of Karrakatta Cemetery in Perth. She left a modest estate of £161 as she had given away much of her salary. One of her tributes stated: "It has been said she possessed the mind of a man". In the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Margaret Brown concludes her biographical essay on Cowan: "She has led a group

of forceful articulate women who made the Western Australian Women's movement a model; while she shared its concern with purity, temperance and ameliorative social work, she gave it her own rational analysis of issues and an austere dedication".

Edith Cowan's modest house in 71 Malcolm Street, West Perth was moved to the grounds of Edith Cowan University. It now houses the Peter Cowan Writer's Centre.



Building 20 (Edith Cowan House): Outside View Photograph courtesy of [Lost on Campus](#)