

A Biography

- A biography is an account of somebody's life, written by another person. It is informative. Read the biography below about Edith Cowan written by Leonie Westenberg. When you have finished reading the text, complete the activity pages that follow.

A Tireless Woman by Leonie Westenberg

She wiped her hands nervously on her dress. Having removed her gloves, she realised just how sweaty were her palms. This was a big day. A big day for her. A big day for women. A big day for the Child Protection Society. She was the first woman elected into Parliament in Australia . . .

Have you ever looked at a \$50 note? Have you ever seen the picture of the woman on the back? That's Edith Cowan - the first woman elected into Australian Parliament. The year? 1921.

Edith Cowan was 59 years of age when she was elected into the Western Australian Parliament. When elected she said, "I stand here today, being in the unique position of the first woman in 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 Honourable members that one of the reasons why women and men also considered it advisable, is because 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."

Cowan faced some obstacles as a female member of Parliament. One of these obstacles came in the form of a newspaper article, written by a male journalist, who criticised Cowan for neglecting her home and family. However, Edith Cowan's husband, James Cowan, whom she had married at the age of 18, was a strong supporter of his wife's career. As Master of the Supreme Court himself, he saw the need to encourage women to enter all professions in life and worked to have his wife elected.

Once an MP, Edith Cowan fought for the right for women to enter all professions. In doing this, she was opposed by Charles Latham, another Member of Parliament. Unlike



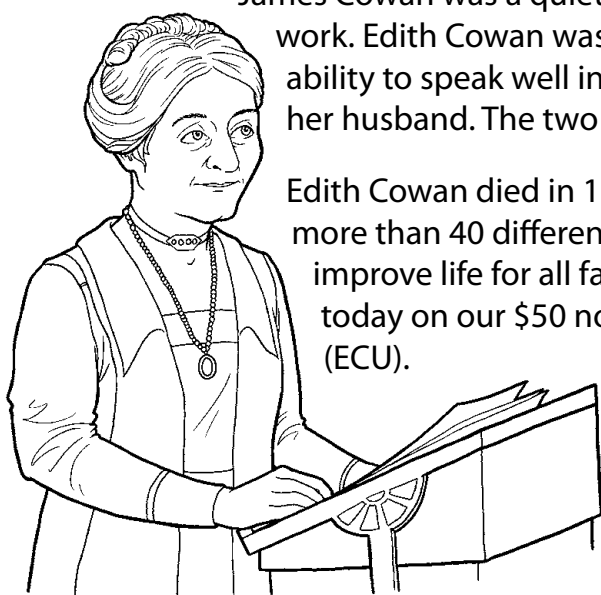
Edith Cowan, who had been involved in volunteer work in societies for the protection of women and children and had seen first-hand some of the difficulties faced by women with no money, and had witnessed children forced into the workforce at an early age, Charles Latham had experienced a more privileged life. He was considered a conservative who wanted to make sure that the social aspects of life, including the role of women at home rather than in the workforce, were not radically changed. Cowan's different upbringing, in an often troubled home rather than a wealthier established home, gave her different insights into the legal status of women. She argued with Charles Latham, claiming that if women could do housework then they were fit and able to take on other work. In reply, Latham said, "You would not suggest a man do that sort of thing (housework)?" To which Cowan replied, "Why not? They are as capable as we."

While Cowan was an MP, the then Railway Minister, William Hill, put in place a tax of one shilling (equivalent to \$5.00 in today's currency) for every pram on a tram or other means of public transport. As a mother of five, Cowan knew the difficulty of travelling, even for a day out in the city, with several children. She also knew that a tax on prams would be something poorer mothers could not afford. Soon after entering Parliament, Cowan opposed the 'pram tax' and had it successfully removed.

Through her husband's work in the court, Cowan witnessed how women and children suffered when their husbands/fathers were in gaol. She set up charities and volunteered in organisations to help these women and this became the driving force of her work in Parliament - to improve the financial and professional lives of women and of families. She also argued for a maternity and child endowment - money given to help expectant mothers and families with young children.

The Children's Protection Society that Cowan set up has now become our Children's Court. Having seen families suffer and children turn to crime to help their families, Cowan made sure that children were not tried as adults but treated differently and with more compassion and care in court.

Cowan's husband James worked alongside his wife in helping the poor and needy. James Cowan was a quietly spoken man but was not afraid of hard work. Edith Cowan was known for her sense of humour and her ability to speak well in public. She was a more social person than her husband. The two worked well together.



Edith Cowan died in 1932, at the age of 71. She was a member of more than 40 different volunteer organisations, working strongly to improve life for all families. As you now know, she is remembered today on our \$50 note and has had a university named after her (ECU).

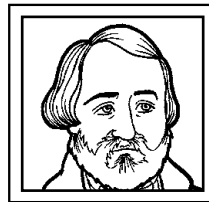
That woman who nervously wiped her hands when being sworn into Parliament as our first female representative is our example still today of how care and compassion can work in government.

● Making Comparisons 2

- After reading the biography entitled *A Tireless Woman*, complete this activity sheet.

Graphic organisers can help readers make meaning of texts by showing differences and relationships in texts. Sometimes a graphic organiser can help a reader compare and contrast ideas or the people in a text. They can help readers answer questions like, "How are the people the same?" and "How are the people different?"

- Look at the people pictured below from the text *A Tireless Woman*. Complete the graphic organiser to compare and contrast.



Edith Cowan & William Hill

One way in which they are similar:

One way in which they are different:

- Use your graphic organisers on this page and on the previous page, to answer the questions below.

1. In many text types, there are heroes and villains. Who do you think you are positioned to see as heroic in the text?

Why? Think about what makes a hero. _____

2. Who do you think we are positioned to see as the antagonists in the text?

Why? Think about what makes a character unlikable. _____



EXTRA ACTIVITY

Imagine that the life of Edith Cowan is going to be the subject of a film. Create a promotional movie poster which celebrates the achievements of Edith Cowan. Depict her as heroic in your poster.