Abstract: From the Order of the British Empire in the past to the Order of Australia today, official honours have been intended as a mark of appreciation and esteem for service given to the community and the nation, and for high achievement in various fields. They have been a traditional reward for those in leadership roles, in politics, the public service, business or the community. Women became broadly eligible for honours when the Order of the British Empire was created in 1917. Who were the women awarded honours then and in the decades that followed? Were they leaders of community organisations, recognised for their services in areas of activity traditionally viewed as the preserve of women, or path-breaking women entering masculine-dominated fields of activity? What awards did women predominantly receive, and what range of leadership roles was recognised by the award of honours to women? Did the feminist movement from the late 1960s bring with it any changes in these patterns? Using the story of Cecilia Downing, the long-serving president of the Victorian Housewives’ Association, as a way into these broader questions, this chapter considers women’s leadership and participation in Australian democracy in the twentieth century through women’s experiences of honours since 1917.

Keywords: honours, leadership, feminism, gender, maternal citizenship

Cecilia Hopkins was born in London in 1858 and migrated to Melbourne with her family that year. After attending Trinity Girls’ School in Williamstown and the Training Institution in Carlton, she became a primary school teacher at Portarlington, a coastal town near Geelong, about one hundred kilometres from Melbourne. In 1885, she married John Downing, a pastor who later became a branch manager of the State Savings Bank of Victoria. Cecilia and John had seven children, but even so Cecilia found time to be active in church affairs, temperance work and philanthropy. One of the first government child-probation officers from 1907, she became state president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1912 and joined a range of groups, including the Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society and the Australian Women’s National League. Having become a member of the Housewives’ Co-operative Association, she was elected president of the Victorian Housewives Association in 1938 and federal president in 1940. Downing
represented Australian Baptist women and the WCTU at international conferences in 1928, and in 1935 became the first president of the Women’s Board of the Baptist Union of Australia. She was state and federal president of the Travellers’ Aid Society of Victoria and secretary of the National Council of Women of Victoria, and during World War II added to her responsibilities involvement in the Victorian Council of Women’s Emergency Service, the Australian Comforts Fund and the War Loan and War Savings Certificates committee. The federal Housewives’ Association, with Downing as its leader, became the largest women’s organisation in Australia, with 130,000 members. Although she ceased to be its president in 1945, Downing continued as president of the Victorian branch until her death in 1952.1

Downing was a widely known and visible public figure, especially later in life, and her comments on various issues were reported in the press around Australia. In 1949, for example, the Brisbane Courier-Mail reported her advocacy of the creation of ‘a new Federal portfolio of national housekeeper’, a post to be held by a woman who was ‘an experienced housewife’, who would focus on issues such as rising food prices.2 Broken Hill’s Barrier Miner described her in 1951, when she was in her early nineties, as ‘still as active a housewife as a woman a third her age’, and reported that she would ‘direct the housewives’ [association] campaign towards the institution of a Ministry for Housekeeping’.3 At her death in 1952 aged 94, the Argus described her as ‘one of the Australian housewife’s best friends’, who had ‘fought for the cause of women for 50 years’.4 Downing had been appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) only two years earlier, in 1950. The citation that appeared in the London Gazette described the honour as being ‘for social welfare services in the State of Victoria’.5 Announced in the Melbourne Argus along with other honours bestowed in the Queen’s Birthday list that year, it was Downing’s award that provided the headline. ‘Housewives’ Leader Awarded MBE’, it said, and above it in slightly smaller print, ‘16 women in Honours List’. The report observed that Downing had been ‘president of the Victorian Housewives’ Association for many years’, and noted that fifteen other women, also ‘prominent in various phases of public life’, had likewise been honoured by the King. Among them were Margaret Lang, Royal Australian Air Force Nursing Service Matron-in-Chief; Jessie Clifton, president of the Returned Nurses’ Memorial Fund in Western Australia; and Iris Morrow, president of the Young Women’s Christian Association in South Australia.6 Of the sixteen women, five had been appointed officers of the civil division of the Order of the British Empire, one an officer of the military division, and ten members of the civil division. The predominant theme of the citations was social welfare work, with medical or patriotic work providing almost all the balance, and one MBE going to Hilda Jackson, a clerk in the office of the Governor-General.
From such awards in the Order of the British Empire in the past to those in the Order of Australia today, honours have been intended as a mark of appreciation and esteem for service given to the community and the nation, and for high achievement in various fields. Both Australian national honours and British imperial honours have been a traditional reward for those in leadership roles in politics, the public service, business or the community. Women became broadly eligible for honours at the establishment of the Order of the British Empire in 1917, its creation having been sparked by the need to reward civilian services to the war effort in the World War I. Besides Cecilia Downing and her fellow awardees in 1950, who were the women who received honours in Australia in the twentieth century? Were they, like Downing, leaders of community organisations, recognised for their services in areas of activity traditionally viewed as the preserve of women? Or were they, like Dame Enid Lyons, path-breaking women entering masculine-dominated fields of activity? What awards did women predominantly receive, and what range of leadership roles was recognised by the award of honours to women? Did the feminist movement from the late 1960s bring with it any changes in these patterns? Using the story of Cecilia Downing as a way in to these broader questions, in this chapter I consider women’s leadership and participation in Australian democracy in the twentieth century through women’s experiences of honours.

Women and the Australian honours system

Before the creation in 1975 of the Order of Australia, the centrepiece of the current Australian honours system, Australians were rewarded for their services and achievements with British imperial honours. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these honours had been revived and extended. By 1901, a range of honours existed, including orders of chivalry like the Order of St Michael and St George and the Order of the Bath, and honours were no longer restricted to the aristocracy. For residents of Australia, however, honours were still relatively limited in number. The establishment of the Order of the British Empire in 1917, as a vehicle for rewarding the large numbers of people who had been mobilised for war, greatly enlarged the pool of potential recipients. Not only was it created on a significantly larger scale than any previous order, it was open to women, which most other orders were not. Before 1917, excepting royal women and those given special awards, only one woman had been appointed to an order: Florence Nightingale, who received the Order of Merit in 1907.7

Women’s experiences of official honours, in Australia as elsewhere, are relatively under researched.8 Much public discussion of honours in Australia has also paid little attention to women’s position. Perhaps the first substantive
discussion of the numerical inequality women have experienced in the award of honours in Australia was a report on women’s participation in the Order of Australia prepared for federal Senator Margaret Reynolds in 1990. The report’s key finding was that women were nominated for awards in fewer numbers than men, with men being ‘three times more likely’ to be nominated than women. Reynolds exhorted women’s organisations to ‘alert their members and encourage them to increase the nomination rate’.9 Proving the necessity of building knowledge of the honours system, one woman appointed to the order was quoted in the report remarking that she ‘hadn’t realised that this was an Award given to women’.10

Women’s access to honours was considered in an official review of Australian honours that took place in 1995. In the public consultation process, there was ‘general agreement’ that women, along with volunteers and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, were ‘not sufficiently recognised’, especially at the upper levels of the system. The inclusion of both women and volunteers in this list is striking, since voluntary, unpaid work has historically tended to be a female-dominated activity – and the committee noted this correlation.11 The final report found that over the preceding five years women were underrepresented not only as nominees, but also as nominators. Compounding these inequalities, a slightly smaller proportion of nominations of women were successful than was the case for nominations of men, except at the lowest level of award. The committee observed that it shared ‘the view of many submissions writers’ that women were ‘not receiving appropriate recognition … for their contribution to society’. Among the reasons identified for this lack of recognition were that women ‘were less aware’ of honours than were men, that women were ‘less likely’ than men to consider official honours ‘as a mechanism for community acknowledgement of the sorts of contributions they make to society’, that women did not have the level of access that men did to ‘business and professional networks’ giving information and advice about the honours system, and that there was no information about honours available that was ‘targeted specifically to women’. But, perceptively, the committee stated that a more important problem was ‘an institutionalised bias’, in that contributions made to a local community were not recognised as highly as contributions made in fields of endeavour such as business, public service, research or the professions. In other words, the criteria used for awarding honours contained an inbuilt inequality, favouring fields dominated by men.12 This observation might equally point to a broader societal problem – the pressures women continue to experience to meet gendered norms as wives, mothers, carers or volunteers, rather than to pursue ambitious careers in business, the public service or other professions.
Exhortations to increase the numerical participation of women in the honours system reflect the limited nature of that participation historically. Women were not honoured in the same numbers, as even a cursory survey of honours lists shows. Moreover, a high proportion of the honours that were conferred on women in Australia in the past were awards of a lower level. At lower levels of the honours system, the proportion of awards going to women was significantly higher than at the upper levels. Overall, women received only 4.6 per cent of titular awards – that is, awards in the first and second classes of certain orders, that bestow the title of ‘Sir’ on men or ‘Dame’ on women – conferred upon Australians since 1900. Even between 1976 and 1986, when an upper level of knights and dames existed in the Order of Australia, only two women were given the honour, as opposed to twelve men. In the third class of the Order of the British Empire, the Commander (CBE), women were awarded only 6 per cent of all the awards made between 1900 and 1994; the percentage of awards going to women rose to fourteen for the fourth class, the OBE, and to twenty-five for the MBE, the fifth class.

The feminist movement and the honours system

Although these figures are well below the proportion of the population who are women, women’s position in relation to the honours system has changed considerably since the beginning of the twentieth century. One aspect of this was the gradual opening to female membership of most orders of chivalry. The opening of orders of chivalry to female membership took place in the context of vast changes in the status and experiences of women over the twentieth century, and of ongoing feminist organisation and activity. Women’s inclusion in the Order of the British Empire in 1917 was recognition of their contributions to the war effort, but it also occurred in the wake of considerable feminist agitation for women’s right to vote, and on other issues. The demand for women’s equality likely played a part in producing an environment in which excluding women from the new order was a far less conceivable decision, especially given the significance of their wartime work. By the end of the century, women were eligible for appointment to all British honours except that of Knight Bachelor.

Another change in women’s participation in the honours system during the last century was a slight increase in the proportion of awards being bestowed upon women. In Australia, this was especially so at the higher levels of award, and especially in the 1970s. Honours at the two highest levels of the Order of the British Empire, which confer the title ‘Dame’ upon the female recipient, increased in number from the 1960s. Only sixteen Australian women became dames before 1960, while in the following decade another fourteen received the title. In the 1970s, the number increased to twenty-five.
Yet this increase was not as dramatic as it initially appears. The number of men receiving the title ‘Sir’ also increased over these years, and the number of titled women remained small in comparison to that of titled men, since men also received the male-only honour of Knight Bachelor in large numbers. A small increase is also evident from 1970 in the proportion of awards of the CBE given to women. In each of the five-year periods between 1935 and 1969 women never received more than 5 per cent of all CBEs awarded to Australians. In the period from 1970 to 1974, slightly over 8 per cent of CBEs went to women, and between 1975 and 1979, women received just over 9 per cent. In the fourth and fifth classes of award, the OBE and the MBE, the pattern is less evident. A higher proportion of these awards had gone to women in the past, and it is not clear that the second wave feminist movement brought any significant change to the number of women receiving these honours. An increase in the proportion of honours being given to women in the wake of the emergence of second wave feminism was much more evident across the Tasman in New Zealand. One reason for this difference might relate to reluctance on the part of left-wing women to accept honours in Australia, since the Australian Labor Party had a long tradition of rejecting imperial honours. Another might be the creation of the Order of Australia in 1975, an award much more acceptable to ALP supporters, as well as to others who had opposed imperial honours. Women’s experience of the Order of Australia, however, was no more inclusive, at least initially. Between 1975 and 1979 a mere 3 per cent of Companionships (AC), the top grade of award, went to women.

Despite these caveats, it seems reasonable to suggest that the second wave of the feminist movement did have some impact upon the honours system. Beginning in the 1960s, significant social, cultural and political changes transformed Australian women’s lives. Among these were a shift away from the traditional nuclear family, a trend towards women having children later, and an increase in numbers of women in paid employment. A key moment in relation to honours was the ending of the marriage bar for women working in the public service in 1966. From this point on, women did not have to leave their public service employment on marriage, which meant that achieving the lengthy or high-level service that attracted honours was much more within women’s reach. As large numbers of honours were given to public servants, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, this was a significant change. The visibility of the feminist movement, and the important changes in women’s social and political status, may also have created a climate of increased awareness of women’s contributions to society. Feminist women were well aware of the imbalance in the numbers and level of awards going to women. In an oral history interview recorded in 1979, Jean Arnot, a librarian and trade unionist who was appointed MBE in 1965,
remembered Mary Tenison Woods, a lawyer who was chief of the office of the status of women in the division of human rights at the United Nations Secretariat from 1950–1958, having been ‘very upset that women at that time were getting lower honours’ than they deserved. Feminist women could also be influential in securing honours for other women, being conscious of the imbalances and willing to nominate each other. Arnot recalled that she received the honour while president of the National Council of Women. ‘The person that instigated proceedings’, she remembered, was a member of the Council.

Leadership, gender and honours

A more profound impact of feminist activism on the honours system is suggested by an analysis of the various fields of activity in which women’s leadership was recognised with honours. In opening honours to women, the honours system itself was transformed. In the past, honours had been given for service to the state, at first military service, and later also service rendered in government and the public and foreign services. By the early twentieth century, honours were also being given to leading figures in industry, business, science and the arts. From 1918, with the new Order of the British Empire open to women in their own right, a different type of activity began to be recognised as service deserving of official honour. This newly recognised type of service was gendered feminine, grounded in the motherly ideals of nurturance and morality that animated the maternalist model of citizenship being developed by feminist women in Australia and elsewhere. Marilyn Lake has argued that the concept of maternal citizenship made it possible for feminists to ‘reconceptualise’ women’s service in the world as being ‘not to an individual master/husband, but to the abstract entity of the state’. The patterns evident in the bestowal of honours on women in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century suggest the state reciprocated by approving this reconceptualisation of women’s role.

In the first years after the establishment of the Order of the British Empire, women were appointed to it in proportions rarely equalled in later years. Awards of the CBE to women in 1918 and 1919 made up 22 per cent of all CBEs bestowed in those years, and women received 14 per cent and 6 per cent of OBEs and MBEs respectively. Although the latter two figures seem rather low – less than that at the higher grade – this imbalance was redressed in the five years from 1920 to 1924, when women received 30 per cent of all MBEs awarded, and 27 per cent of OBEs. These numbers are best explained by the intended purpose of the order, which was to reward services to the war effort in a war in which non-combatants were mobilised in far greater numbers than in previous wars. This surmise is backed up by an analysis of
the citations for the awards given to women in these years, which shows that war service was overwhelmingly the reason provided for the award. The same pattern is evident in the early appointments of men to the order. Fifteen women were appointed CBE in 1918 and 1919, all for their services to the war effort – ten being appointed to the civil division, for example, for work with the Red Cross, and five being appointed to the military division for their work in the Army Nursing Service. Awards of the lower grades of OBE and MBE followed the same pattern. Even Nellie Melba, who became the first Australian woman given the title ‘Dame’ in 1918, received the honour for ‘Patriotic work during the war’ rather than in recognition of her operatic career, although her position as a celebrated singer was fundamental to her wartime fundraising. In this pattern of honouring women for their leadership in charitable and patriotic activities during the war, Cecilia Downing’s story is instructive. Writing of Downing’s increasingly national public life after 1918, Judith Smart argued that the war confirmed her ‘transition from an identity with the local worlds of church and community to the broader spheres of economy, state and nation’. In the same way, World War I provided a space in which many women performed leadership roles in the service of democracy and good citizenship for which they were honoured.

After the war, the area of activity most prominent in the citations given for awards to women was voluntary community service and social welfare work. A good deal has been written about middle- and upper-class women’s unpaid organising and charity work, and about the ideal of maternal citizenship which such work, along with motherhood itself, embodied. From the late nineteenth century, feminist women strove to create ‘a specifically feminine view of citizenship’ and ‘a concept of civic identity that stressed a unique maternal and domestic responsibility for the construction and defence of the nation’. Such a maternalist ideal played an important role in the development of a welfare state, not only in Australia but also in other parts of the world. The centrality of this model of exemplary femininity and female service to the nation was well displayed in honours lists over the twentieth century, especially in the first half of the century. Citations for honours bestowed upon women at all levels of award frequently referred to ‘services to the community’, ‘services to charities’, ‘services to social welfare’, or similar. Occasionally, specific mention would be made of an organisation to which the recipient had contributed, as in the case of Ellen Kinchington, who was appointed MBE in 1936 for her ‘service to social welfare through the Red Cross Society’. Brief descriptions of community or charitable service often conceal a lifetime of service to women’s and community organisations, in the mould of Cecilia Downing. For example, Grace Emily Munro was appointed MBE in 1935 for her ‘Philanthropy in New South Wales’. In World War I, Munro had been honorary organising secretary of the Australian Army
Medical Corps’ comforts fund and involved in the Australian Red Cross Society. In 1922, she had taken part in organising the conference that resulted in the founding of the Country Women’s Association in New South Wales, and she had become its president, travelling around the state and in Queensland to help establish branches. Before her retirement from the organisation in 1926, she met with politicians to argue for the creation of maternity wards in country hospitals and for better facilities for women and children at railway stations and on trains. And she worked to raise money for a variety of causes, such as the Australian Inland Mission’s Aerial Medical Service, the St John Ambulance Association and the Red Cross. Women were also given higher honours for such work. Of all damehoods listed on the It’s An Honour website (including those in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) a little over two-fifths included community or philanthropic services in the citation for the award, by far the largest single category of work for which women received a title.

Another area of activity in which women received honours in significant numbers in the first half of the twentieth century was the ‘feminised professions’ of teaching and nursing. The women who worked in these areas fell between the field of voluntary community service that had come to be accepted as appropriately feminine in the nineteenth century and those medical and educational careers that continued to be perceived as masculine well into the twentieth century; that is, doctors, surgeons and academics. Many hospital matrons and headmistresses appeared in the lists of honours published in the first half of the twentieth century. Such work was not perceived as worthy of the highest honours, which were generally reserved for educational work within tertiary institutions and for medical work as a researcher or surgeon. It is reflective of wider changes in society that women began to receive honours in larger numbers for a wider range of medical and educational services in the second half of the twentieth century, as women too entered these positions. Yet work that has been historically gendered feminine, like nursing and teaching, remains undervalued compared to those careers gendered masculine. Service in these roles continued throughout the twentieth century to be honoured largely with awards at the lower levels of the honours system. The promotion of the maternal citizen did little to alter this relative valuation, and nor did the feminist elevation of women’s values in the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Women did also occasionally receive honours for their efforts in areas of activity historically gendered masculine, including in the fields of endeavour most often rewarded with an honour, political and public service. Public and political service were not only prominent in honours lists over the first half of the twentieth century, they were areas of work dominated by men, in which women were until recently rarely able to exercise leadership. All the same, a
small number of women received honours for public and political services at all levels of the honours system. Among those to receive the title ‘Dame’ for such service were Florence Cardell-Oliver, whose citation for the DBE in 1951 stated that she was the Western Australian Minister for Health; Pattie Menzies, wife of Robert Menzies, in 1954; Enid Lyons, one of the first women elected to the federal parliament in Australia, in 1957; and Annabelle Rankin, another political pioneer, also in 1957. Likewise, women sometimes received appointment to the lower grades of the Order of the British Empire for their public or political service. In 1958, for instance, Dorothy Edwards was appointed OBE. She had been the first woman to be mayor of Launceston, Tasmania, between December 1955 and December 1957. As these examples suggest, women not only received honours for a particularly feminine variety of service to the state, they also began to be given awards for their achievements in entering fields of activity where honours were traditionally frequently bestowed. Indeed, citations for public or political services formed a significant proportion of all awards of damehoods throughout the twentieth century. Slightly over a quarter of all citations for DBE, GBE or AD listed on the *It’s an Honour* website included either public or political service (or both). This pattern is not surprising, being consistent with the longstanding primacy of such work in honours lists both in Australia and in the United Kingdom.

However, a closer investigation of what kinds of work were being rewarded in such ways is revealing. The line between public or political services and community or social welfare services was a blurry one. Having spent years working in politically oriented groups or public roles, a recipient might nonetheless be cited for community service. The Australian Women’s National League, one of the organisations Cecilia Downing joined, was ‘overtly political’, and the Housewives’ Association was a significant lobby group, which concerned itself with issues such as increasing women’s representation in government and public administration as well as with matters of public policy more overtly affecting the interests of housewives. Through participation in groups like these, women acquired political and organisational skills and developed their experience and networks. Downing’s citation for the MBE might have made reference to ‘social welfare services’, but her visibility in the press, and its reporting of her views on a wide range of political and social issues, suggests she was a political actor and public figure as much as were those who received honours for public or political services. Likewise, a woman may have been honoured for her work as a member of parliament or cabinet minister while also remaining within the bounds of concerns deemed appropriately feminine. The first woman to reach full cabinet rank in Australia, Florence Cardell-Oliver, was appointed DBE in 1951, while Minister for Health in the Western Australian Government.
Among her initiatives as minister was the introduction of a free milk scheme for school children, something many women in charitable and social welfare organisations might have endorsed. Honours bestowed for public or political services thus often recognised the same model of maternal citizenship as did honours given for women’s community and social welfare services.

Conclusion
Judith Smart has described Cecilia Downing as ‘unquestionably one of the most influential women of her time in Australia’. That being so, and confronted with the range of organisations and causes to which Downing gave her energies, the MBE appears something of a slight reward. Smart explains the disappearance of Downing’s name from public memory, in contrast to those of some of her contemporaries like Enid Lyons, as a consequence of Lyons having ‘succeeded in the essentially masculine public domain of parliamentary politics’, while Downing’s achievements ‘remained within the separate and subordinate women’s sphere’. Perhaps this is also the explanation for Lyons having been appointed DBE – becoming Dame Enid Lyons – while Downing received only the MBE, despite the impressively large list of organisations she began, developed or headed. But Downing, and others like her, might not have drawn this distinction. As Smart noted, the work of women like Downing reveals the difficulties inherent in a conceptual division between public and private spheres. Downing saw ‘society and its government’ as ‘simply an extension of the household and family’. Her advocacy of the creation of a federal position of national housekeeper epitomises this idea. The holder of such a position, as a cabinet member or public servant, may have received honours for her public or political service, but she would also have been following in the footsteps of the many women whose particular brand of feminine organising had seen them cited for their services to social welfare and the community.

In different ways, all the women receiving honours were exercising leadership, whether in politics or charitable organising. The women who built and ran organisations such as the Housewives’ Association were leaders in the community; they understood themselves to be providing leadership on a variety of political and moral questions, and they were honoured for doing so. If the honours lists published each January and June implied official endorsement of certain models of femininity, particularly that of maternal citizenship, this was evidence of a significant shift in the institution of the honours system. Just as women’s advocacy of an ideal of maternal citizenship influenced the shape of the welfare state, so it did the honours system, allowing community and social welfare work to be cast as services to the state or nation, worthy of official honours. Yet, as the statistics show, this shift was
by no means the end of gender inequity in the honours system, as women have continued to receive honours in lower proportions than do men. In the early twenty-first century many believe it is selfless community service which ought to receive the highest honours, while women’s leadership and contributions to the nation are now honoured in a great variety of fields – from politics to sports and from medicine to business. It remains to be seen how Australians will define leadership – female or male – worthy of honour in the future.

2 Courier-Mail (Brisbane), ‘Wants “National Housekeeper”’, 13 January 1949.
3 Barrier Miner (Broken Hill), ‘85, Again Elected President’, 22 May 1951.
4 Argus (Melbourne), ‘Women Lose Leader’, 1 September 1952.
5 Supplement to the London Gazette, 8 June 1950, 2796.
9 Unnamed woman quoted by Margaret Reynolds in her introduction to the senate report Women and the Order of Australia (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 1990), foreword.
10 Women and the Order of Australia, 1.
That is, sixty-seven awards were made to women, and 1451 to men. For further discussion of the award of titles in Australia, see Karen Fox, ‘Knights and Dames in Australia’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, http://adb.anu.edu.au/essay/2.


This is a significant exception, given the relatively large number of awards of Knight Bachelor made compared with other honours that confer knighthood.

Jean Arnot, interviewed by Amy McGrath, 8 March 1979, ORAL TRC 659/1-2, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Ibid.


29 Ibid., 23.
30 Ibid., 24.