The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE0544

Dobson, Emily

(1842 - 1934)

Born	18421010, Port Arthur Van Diemen's Land Australia
Died	19340605, Hobert Tasmania Australia
Occupation	Advocate, Philanthropist, Welfare worker, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Emily Dobson was a tour de force in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Tasmanian society. As the wife of the State Premier, Henry Dobson, she played a central role in multiple political and charitable organisations. She was vice-president of the Tasmanian section of the National Council of Women in 1899, and attended the first meeting of the International Council of Women in London that year. Dobson became president of the National Council of Women Tasmania in 1904 and held that position until her death. She was the first Australian to be elected vice- president of the International Council of Women at the Rome quinquennial in 1914.

Details

Emily Dobson was Tasmania's bespectacled and formidable grand old lady by the time she died in 1934 in her early nineties. Born in Port Arthur in 1842 in what was then Van Diemen's Land, she was influenced by the social conscience of her father, artist and public servant Thomas Lempriere, who died when she was nine years old. In 1868 she married Tasmania's future Premier, Henry Dobson, who shared her ideas on philanthropy and temperance, linked though they were to the cause of women.

Emily Dobson became involved in just about every charitable organisation in the State of Tasmania. She was founding president of the ladies' committee of the Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution; founding president of the Ministering Children's League; and president of the committee of management of the Victoria Convalescent Home at Lindisfarne. She co-established the New Town Consumptives' Sanatorium in 1905, and in 1918 became first vice-president of the Child Welfare Association. She was vice-president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Tasmania and life patroness of the Tasmanian Bush Nursing Association. With her husband, she established the Free Kindergarten Association in Tasmania in 1911. That same year she established the Girl Guides' Association of Tasmania, appointing herself State Commissioner. She founded the Tasmanian branch of the Alliance Française, and the Tasmanian Lyceum Club.

As a middle-aged woman, Dobson became secretary of the Women's Sanitary Association, which formed in 1891 specifically to counter an outbreak of typhoid and ran candidates in the municipal election of 1892. In Hobart, her Relief Restaurant Committee operated a soup kitchen and set up the Association for Improvement of Dwellings of the Working Classes. Dobson was widely praised among her peers, but more often than not, the efforts of the Sanitary Association were belittled by local newspapers. According to historian Ruth Barton, it was 'the anomaly of charitable women undertaking work which at home they paid sevants to do' which attracted unfavourable press attention, and certainly the Dobson family wealth meant that Emily had no need to carry out domestic chores in her own home.

Like so many other charitably-inclined women of her time, Dobson had a particular concern for child welfare. With the Society for the Protection of Children, she secured the passage of an Infant Life Protection Act in 1907. The Act authorised members of the Society to enter homes where infants were being minded for payment, without notice. Taken at face value, the Act was a noble attempt to put an end to the practice of baby farming, but research by Caroline Evans and Naomi Parry suggests that it was an attempt to control the poorer sections of society.

Dobson was as dominant in politics as she was in health and welfare. She was a member of the Women's Non-Party League of Hobart. She held office in the Tasmanian branch of the League of Nations Union and the Victoria League of Tasmania; the National Council of Women (State and Federal bodies); and the International Council of Women. In 1907 she represented the Tasmanian government at the Women's Work Exhibition in Melbourne. She was honoured by the National Council of Women (Tasmania) in 1919, with the establishment of the Emily Dobson Philanthropic Prize Competition for welfare organisations.

Events

1906 - 1924
Australian Delegation to International Council of Women

1898 -
Blind, Deaf and Dumb Institution Ladies' Committee

1914 - 1924
International Council of Women

1899 - 1924
International Council of Women

1892 -
Ministering Children's League

Published resources

Resource Section
Dobson, Emily (1842-1934), Reynolds, I. A., 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A080333b.htm

Emily Dobson (1842-1934), Rimon, Wendy,
http://www.women.tas.gov.au/significantwomen/search/emily_dobson.html

National Council of Women, Rimon, Wendy,
http://www.women.tas.gov.au/significantwomen/search/ncw.htm

Emily Dobson, Tasmanian Government, c.2005,
http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/cdd/programs_and_services/tasmanian_honour_roll_of_women/inductees/2005/emily_dobs

Emily Dobson, Jordan, Renee, 2006,
http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/D/Emily%20Dobson.htm

Conference Paper
A few viragos on a stump : the womanhood suffrage campaign in Tasmania 1880-1920, Pearce, Vicki, 1985

Thesis
Mrs Henry Dobson : Victorian 'do - gooder' or sincere social reformer : an analysis of her charitable and public welfare work in the 1890's, Taylor, Annette Rosalie, 1972

In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Emily's Empire: Emily Dobson and the National Council of Women of Tasmania, Jordan, Renee, 2004

Book Section
Emily Dobson, Barton, Ruth, 1988

Book
The history of the National Council of Women in [sic] South Australia, 1902-1980, Pitt, Barbara J, 1986

Lithgow, 1942: a survey of the life of the town, Dobson, Hazel and Howes, H.E., 1943

Edited Book
200 Australian Women: A Redress Anthology, Radi, Heather, 1988,
https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071105022623/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/78644/20071105-1315/www.200australianwo

Journal Article
Vessels of Progressivism? Tasmanian State Girls and Eugenics, 1900-1940, Evans, Caroline and Naomi Parry, 2001

Site Exhibition
In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html

Stirrers with Style! Presidents of the National Council of Women of Australia and its predecessors, National Council of Women of Australia, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ncwa

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
Records of the National Council of Women of Australia, 1924-1990 [manuscript]

Archives Office of Tasmania
Correspondence, minutes and associated papers of the National Council of Women of Tasmania

John Oxley Library, Manuscripts and Business Records Collection
7266 National Council of Women of Queensland Minute Books 1905-2004

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