

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE26101172

Baker, Kate

(1861 - 1953)

Born	18610423, Cappoquin County Waterford Ireland
Died	19531008, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Arts advocate, Literary mentor, Teacher, Writer

Summary

Kate Baker was awarded an Order of the British Empire in 1937 for services to Australian literature in recognition of her lifetime's work: to support and promote Australian literature nationally and internationally.

For forty years she was actively engaged in the Australian literary scene, volunteering her time on committees, speaking at literary meetings, judging literary competitions, profiling her literary peers, and writing for newspapers and magazines. She believed in the importance of supporting the literary journals of the time; becoming a regular subscriber to most Australian literary journals.

Her final years were devoted to assisting in establishing an Australian collection of art and literature through the Fulbright Scholarship programme at Pennsylvania State University in the United States of America where Australian literature was taught in the 1960s and 1970s.

Details

Born in Waterford, Ireland, Kate Baker arrived in Williamstown, Victoria in 1870 with her widowed mother and sister Marianne. She attended school immediately at North Williamstown Public School and the seed that had already been planted at a young age in Ireland soon grew into a love of learning and a life dedicated to Australian literature.

She trained as a pupil teacher in the late 1870s and taught in many primary schools throughout Victoria, retiring finally in 1930 at the age of 62.

Meeting Joseph Furphy at her first teaching post in Wanalta Creek in regional Victoria would shape Kate's future. Encouraging him to write and having a keen interest in reading and writing herself, she soon became an active member of the Melbourne literary scene and devoted her spare time to promoting Australian literature, encouraging young poets and writers, and supporting through subscription, newly published literary journals.

In 1937 Kate was the first woman in Australia to be awarded an Order of the British Empire in the Civil Division for her 'services to Australian literature.' She continued this work until she was in her nineties and relished the opportunity to send Australian books to university and other libraries all over the world.

Following World War II Kate established and was secretary of the Australasian Literary Commemorative Association in Victoria. This association was dedicated to commemorating the work and lives of bygone Australian writers and cultivating and developing an interest in Australian literature. Her goal was to expand the association nationally.

Realising that her life was coming to an end, Kate meticulously organised her letters and papers, sending some to the National Library in Canberra, others to the Royal Historical Society in Melbourne and the remainder to the State Library of Victoria.

Kate may have turned 90, but this did not slow her down. Her final accomplishment culminated in assisting in the establishment of the 'Moody Memorial Collection' of Australiana in the Pattee Library at Pennsylvania State University, America. She did not live to see this collection in use, however the Australian books supplied were routinely used to teach Australian art and literature at the university in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although Kate never married or had children of her own, as the youngest of six children she was surrounded by family; brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews and she had a stream of lifelong friends, most of whom she outlived. She had a great love of children as evidenced by her career as a teacher.

Kate Baker died in the Karinyah Convalescent Hospital in Camberwell on 8 October 1953 at the age of 92. Two weeks before her death she was appointed honorary vice-president of the Australian Council of Civil Liberties by its founder, Brian Fitzpatrick. More than two hundred people attended her funeral at St Peter's Eastern Hill, an Anglican church.

Published resources

Book

Joseph Furphy : the legend of a man and his book, Franklin, Miles and Kate Baker, 1944

The poems of Joseph Furphy [Tom Collins, author of Such is life], Baker, Kate, 1916

Author Details

Mary (Baker) Nelson

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