Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0045

Norris, Dame Ada May

(1901 - 1989)

Born	19010728, Greenbushes Western Australia Australia
Died	19890710, Armadale Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Community worker, Women's rights activist, Women's rights organiser

Summary

Ada May Norris, née Bickford was educated at Melbourne High School and the University of Melbourne, where she graduated BA Dip. Ed. In 1924. In 1929 she married John Norris. From 1951, Ada Norris was involved in numerous committees and organisations promoting women, multiculturalism, children and immigration.

Ada Norris was appointed Officer of the British Empire (10 June 1954) and Dame Commander of the of the British Empire on 12 June 1976 for distinguished community service. On 14 June 1969 Norris was awarded the Order of St Michael and St George – Commanders while President of the National Council of Women.

Details

Ada Norris was president of the National Council of Women of Australia 1967-1970 and was responsible for the reversion to its original name in 1970, but, for decades before and after her presidency, she was a force for change in the National Councils and the wider Australian community. She served as honorary secretary in Ivy Brookes' innovative Board of Directors 1948-1952, following her president's lead in becoming involved at a national level with status of women issues and migration reform. Positions as convenor of migration for NCW Victoria and then for ANCW led to her appointment as vice-convenor of migration with the International Council of Women. She was a leading member of the Good Neighbour Council of Victoria, and in 1950 of the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council, serving on this for more than 20 years, always as an advocate of humane and measured reform. Within the NCW, she took a leading role in national campaigns on a wide range of matters concerning the status of women, including in particular equal pay and equality within marriage. This experience led to her appointment as Australia's official delegate to the United Nations Status of Women Commission (CSW) over an unprecedented 3 sessions, from 1961 to 1963. She was president of the United Nations Association of Australia's Victorian division 1961-1971, and chaired the national committee for International Women's Year and the Committee for the Decade of Women. In 1969, she was appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, the first Australian woman so appointed, and in 1976 Dame Commander of the British Empire.

Ada May Norris was born on 28 July 1901 at Greenbushes, WA, daughter of H.A. Bickford, and grand-daughter of the Reverend E.S. Bickford, a leader in the Methodist church. The family moved to her father's home state of Victoria while Ada was a child.

Ada Norris was educated at Birchip State School, Melbourne High School and the University of Melbourne, where she graduated with a BA and Dip. Ed. in 1924 and MA in 1926. She taught at Leongatha and Melbourne High Schools, but resigned in 1929 to marry lawyer John Gerald Norris, later a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria. The couple had two daughters, Rosemary and Jane.

Ada Norris took up voluntary work while her children were still in primary school – an unusual step for women of her class and generation. In his eulogy on her death, her son-in-law noted that 'a trained and restless mind, and a degree of ambition, was not to be satisfied by the cares of managing a house, children and a husband – she wanted to play a part in the wider community also'. He might have added that her role there would always be shaped by a pragmatic idealism committed to justice and equality.

Ada Norris's first concern was for children in need. She joined the Children's Hospital Auxiliary, then became secretary to the newly established Victorian Society for Crippled Children. In 1941, she became the VSCC's delegate to the National Council

of Women of Victoria, and almost immediately took on the job of secretary for that organisation. In 1944, she became a vice-president of NCW Victoria, and, in the same year, foundation secretary of the Advisory Council for the Physically Handicapped, the forerunner of the Australian Council for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled. She later served as president(1955-1957) and vice-president (1957-1962) of this organisation. She continued to work for the Victorian Society for Crippled Children and Adults until the 1970s, becoming its patron and historian. Her concern for children's growth and development also led to the foundation in 1954 of the Victorian Children's Book Council, where she served as president and then national president in 1960.

From the 1950s, Ada Norris developed expertise and leadership in three other key areas of Australian public life – ageing, immigration, and status of women's issues – the last two at national and international levels. Her major platform for these activities was the National Council of Women; she was president of NCW Victoria 1951-1954, honorary secretary of the national body 1948-1952, and national president 1967-1970. In 1951, she proposed and helped initiate the establishment of an 'Old People's Welfare Council', later renamed the Victorian Council for the Ageing, which worked to set up government-funded support for home help for the elderly, hot meals and recreation centres. She continued to work as a vice-president of this council until 1980, her own 80th year.

In 1950, Norris was appointed convenor of NCW Victoria's Migration Standing Committee, and, late in the same year, she took on the same role at national level. In 1952, she accepted the position of vice-convenor of migration with the International Council of Women, and held all three positions until 1966 when she relinquished her national responsibilities to become the ICW convenor of migration. Through these roles, she became a leading member of the Good Neighbour Council of Victoria, and later of the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council. She served on the Commonwealth council for more that 20 years, at a time of great change in Australia's immigration policies, and was always a force for humane and inclusive policy and practice. She worked on its subcommittees like the Committee on Migrant Women and the Committee on Migrant Centres and Hostels, and acted as its deputy chair from 1968 to 1971. She had perhaps more expertise on local, national and international migration issues than any Australian of her generation.

Ada Norris was similarly committed to and expert on issues relating to the inequality of men and women. Within the NCW, she took a leading role in national campaigns on a wide range of matters to do with the status of women, including equal pay, rights before the law, representation on public bodies, both national and international, laws with regard to marriage and divorce, and access to all forms of education and work for all women, married or not. In the case of equal pay, for example, Norris led the NCW to a policy of intervening in Arbitration Court decisions in the interests of women workers – a practice that finally achieved limited success in 1974. Her knowledge and determination on these matters was nurtured by her appointment as Australia's official delegate to the United Nations Status of Women Commission (CSW) over an unprecedented 3 sessions, from 1961 to 1963. Her international experience strengthened her concern for Australia's role in the Pacific, and, as president of NCW Australia, she established an appeals committee to raise funds for a women's hall of residence at the University of Papua New Guinea.

Engagement with CSW also led Ada Norris to wider United Nations activism in Australia; she was president of the United Nations Association of Australia's Victorian division 1961-1971, and, with her CSW, ICW and NCWA experience, she was an obvious choice to chair the UNAA national committee for International Women's Year 1974-1976, and the Committee for the Decade of Women until 1980.

Ada Norris was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire in June 1954 and Dame Commander of the British Empire in June 1976 for distinguished community service. In June 1969, she was appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, the first Australian woman so appointed. She was also awarded the UN Peace Medal in 1975 and, in 1980, Melbourne University honoured her with a Doctorate of Laws.

Dame Ada was also a historian. She published a history of the Victorian Society for Crippled Children and Adults, *The Society*, in 1974 and in 1978 a history of the National Council of Women of Victoria, *Champions of the Impossible*.

'It is from the champions of the impossible rather than the slaves of the possible that creative evolution draws its force'.

Prepared by: Jan Hipgrave, Marian Quartly and Judith Smart

Events

2001 - 2001
Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

1976 - 1980
UNAA Committee for the Decade for Women

1974 - 1976
UNAA National Committee for Internationa Women’s Year

1961 - 1971
United Nations Association of Australia (Victoria)

1961 - 1963
United Nations Status of Women Commission (Official Australian Delegate)

Published resources

Edited Book
Who's Who of Australian Women, Lofthouse, Andrea, 1982

The society : being some account of the Victorian Society for Crippled Children and Adults, Norris, Ada, 1974

Resource
Victorian Women's Roll of Honour: Women Shaping the Nation, 2001,
https://herplacemuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/2001-Honour-Roll-Booklet.pdf

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book
Champions of the impossible: a history of the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1902-1977, Norris, Ada, 1978

Site Exhibition
Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.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

Newsletter
UNNA Victoria Newsletter, UNNA, 2001

Journal Article
Vale Dame Ada Norris, Scotford, Jessie. M., 1989

Resource Section
Ada Norris (1901 - 1989): Champion of the Impossible, Smart, Judith, 2011,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/fff

Norris, Dame Ada May (1901-1989), Fitzherbert, Margaret, 2012,
http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/norris-dame-ada-may-14997/text26186

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives
Norris, Dame Ada May

Norris, Dame Ada May

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Ada Norris interviewed by Amy McGrath [sound recording]

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

State Library of Victoria
National Council of Women of Victoria

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Digital resources



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