
In any historical evaluation of the role of women in Australian politics, it is easy to dismiss the impact May Holman MLA had on public life. The tragedy is that whilst May Holman was elected the first female Labor Member of Parliament, her untimely death at the age of 46 meant her legacy is not assured. May Holman was born in Broken Hill in 1893, to Katherine and Jack, a miner who later became involved in trade unionism. Moving to WA, Jack Holman represented miners and timber workers and as Secretary of the Australian Timber Workers’ Union (ATWU) soon became a Labor Member of the Legislative Assembly from 1902 – 1919 and again from 1923 until his death from a burst appendix in 1925 at the age of 53. May Holman replaced her father as the Member for Forrest after successfully negotiating the complex worlds of industrial and political organised labour.

This book is an important addition to the collective knowledge of Western Australian political and social history by providing an insight into May Holman’s personal and political life. It should have been the perfect opportunity for May Holman to be solidly situated in the political, industrial and social history of Western Australia. But it falls desperately short. There is no attempt to put Holman’s achievements into context. May Holman was more than simply a typist. She was more than just an organiser of amateur concerts and theatrical performances. Whilst Hopkins discusses May Holman’s political achievements, it feels that it is her style rather than her substance, which holds her attention.

Strangely for a book on May Holman, there is no mention of the work conducted by Labor Party activist Jean Beadle for Jack Holman when he was the Member for Forrest. Beadle travelled to ‘isolated bush sidings where the workers families lived and talked to the women in their wretched huts and tents’¹. This information was used by Jack Holman in a speech to the Legislative Assembly in August 1924 in his bid to regulate the timber industry. Whilst May Holman famously travelled on the cow catcher on the front of locomotives during her campaign to succeed her father, years previously Jean Beadle discovered that workers in a siding called Kirup lived in old pigsties and water was provided by the timber companies in uncleaned oil tins². Beadle found that women suffered especially in these conditions. A lack of maternity options for women meant they were often unable to afford medical treatment and in North Dandalup, ‘pregnant women were forced to

² Oliver, p. 90.
travel to hospital on the tender of a railway engine’. The stories of working class women would have been perfect for this book to explore in conjunction with the union and political activism of May Holman. But it doesn’t.

The use of fewer, disparate literary devices could have improved this book. The inexplicable insertion of Katherine Susannah Pritchard into the narrative remains puzzling. Whilst it isn’t much of a stretch for the reader to think that Holman and Pritchard had met, Hopkins implores the reader to imagine them in a tearoom in West Perth in the winter of 1925 […] Katharine is pleased May has accepted her invitation to meet … their talk turns to courage and honour and duty, and May, emboldened by the graciousness of the older woman, inclines her head to ask quietly about Katharine’s own road to political activism.

It is at this point the book takes a sudden turn into fantasy. In discussing Holman’s opposition to conscription, Hopkins ponders ‘was she influenced … by an ongoing respect and admiration for the pacifism of Katharine Susannah Pritchard?’ Perhaps reading about Katharine Susannah Pritchard would answer this question, but that really isn’t the point: books, for the most part, should be largely self-contained.

The editing intrudes several times but none more so than when discussing May Holman’s death. Hopkins provides a single quote which is attributed to two separate sources. It was either the secretary of the ATWU who ‘captured the personal nature of [Holman’s] political commitment’ or the ‘personal lament from members of her old school’ (p. 58) by saying ‘she [was] a radiant personality, loved life and remained always a charming lady, girlish, yet womanly, cheerful, though carrying the troubles of others in addition to her own full share’. However, the use of sound effects to describe the car crash that killed May Holman in 1939 was simply strange.


3 Oliver, p. 90.
4 L. Hopkins, The Magnificent Life of Miss May Holman: Australia’s First Female Labor Parliamentarian, Fremantle, 2016, p. 32.
5 Hopkins, p. 39.
6 Hopkins, p. 47.
7 Hopkins, pp. 47, 58.
8 Hopkins, p. 208.
Reminiscent of the 1966 *Batman* film, this description makes the tragedy of May Holman’s death into a cartoon.

When writing about historical figures there is a need to strike a balance between finding a wide audience, and being overly dry and academic. However, the fantasy elements detract from a full picture of Holman’s impact on public life. Perhaps this book is a product of an author who has taken control of the project part way through completion and so the fingerprints of the previous owner still haven’t dried. Whilst the structure and narrative form detract from the content, this book deserves to be regarded as important by deepening our understanding of Western Australian history and politics. However, it is a shame that the book didn’t go further and situate the life of May Holman into the stories of Western Australian working class women.

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