

# THE MAGNIFICENT LIFE OF MISS MAY HOLMAN

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST FEMALE LABOR PARLIAMENTARIAN

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## FOREWORD

In her concluding paragraph of this engaging biography, Leckie Hopkins asks us to contemplate what we can learn from May Holman's trailblazing life as she 'charted new territory for women', demonstrating that a woman can be 'an excellent parliamentarian, a fine friend, a compassionate soul'. She asks us to remember that Holman achieved this while navigating the shoals of the 'almost impenetrable' masculine privilege which was part of her world and was (and remains) 'invisible to those who continue to enjoy it.'

Holman appeared to understand that men can't or won't see that their definitions of merit and their expectations about performance are nothing more than rules they have made up to protect their own positions, albeit often unconsciously. Rather than confronting this privilege head on (although she used wit to good effect to draw attention to it), Holman showed by her actions that what is required of a member of parliament has nothing to do with a person's gender. As John Stuart Mill said, what we require are 'enlightened individuals who will be mature and responsible because they reflect upon the issues that face them', a formula which could certainly improve the quality of our parliamentary representation today.

While Holman explicitly repudiated the description of herself as a 'feminist' she, nevertheless, epitomised the core of the feminist cause in the way she lived and worked. Leckie Hopkins documents Holman's political development from her strong family roots in the Labor movement, through her experiences as a popular musical performer, to her feisty representation of her South-West constituency (leading to her being re-elected five times) and her

understanding of the importance of speaking to people in terms they could easily embrace. The scope of her passionate, but practical, activism was enlarged and her commitment to improving the position of women deepened after her visit to Europe to observe the workings of the League of Nations. She continued to learn and adjust her thinking throughout her brief life.

Today Holman's example might give us pause to reflect on the fact that the journey to equality is far from over – women are still subjected to violence in their homes; too many exist on low incomes with poor employment prospects and, while more women occupy positions of power than in Holman's day, they are seen as fair game for misogyny and ridicule.

Behind the aggregate economic and social indicators is evidence that there is real disadvantage and distress in many Australian communities, despite the decades of sustained economic growth. While more women are in paid work, the majority still work in a range of low-paid, part-time and precarious jobs. Generally speaking, work is not structured to meet families' needs, but rather to suit the employer's. Equal pay remains an elusive goal – the gender pay gap has now hit a record high. The persistence of the gap indicates that the forces at play are deeply entrenched and difficult to eradicate – there is obvious prejudice in decisions about hiring, salaries and promotions. At the base of the problem is a persistent failure to properly value women's skills and 'women's work' as well as continuing occupational segregation. It doesn't help that women still bear the bulk of responsibility for caring for family members.

And violence against women remains a stain on our community; a series of horrendous murders and assaults of women and children has catapulted 'domestic violence' into the spotlight – again – but the issue waxes and wanes in political favour, with solemn pronouncements that 'we cannot tolerate violence against women' delivered against a backdrop of never-ending pilot programs. The deaths and injury of women are treated, for the most part, as inevitable, like the road toll.

In the face of these, and many similar affronts to equality and

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human dignity, May Holman would, no doubt, have rolled up her sleeves and organised. She would have confronted the problems squarely, and skillfully debated her opponents; she would have cajoled her supporters into more effective action, all the while smiling with the pleasure of working for her beloved people. We could do worse than remember and emulate this fine woman.

Professor Carmen Lawrence  
The University of Western Australia  
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## PREFACE

May Holman (1893–1939) held the Western Australian State seat of Forrest for fourteen years from 1925 until her accidental death in 1939. She made history not only as the first Labor woman to be elected to an Australian parliament but also, in 1935, as the first woman parliamentarian in the entire British Empire to have served for a decade or more. These were turbulent times internationally and at home: at the time of her election Australians were still reeling from the impacts of the Great War; by 1930 the disastrous effects of a global depression were being felt; and at the time of her death, Australia was about to be swept into a second world war.

I first ‘met’ May Holman towards the end of my own parliamentary career when, as part of a nationwide attempt to encourage more Labor women into Australian parliamentary life, I researched and edited *We Hold Up Half the Sky: the voices of Western Australian ALP women in Parliament*, a collection containing short political biographies of each of the twenty-two Labor women elected to represent Western Australians in the seven decades since 1925.

What I learned about May Holman endeared her to me and to those assisting with the book’s compilation. We saw in her a woman with a strong sense of loyalty to her own family and to the Great Labor Family; a woman with a clear political and personal ideology, one whom constituents could rely upon. She had amazing energy for organising events despite periods of ill-health and, in addition to her electorate advocacy, she demonstrated a strong sense of justice, particularly for women and for trade unionists.

There was no biography of this most deserving woman and I planned to write one. I began the research process by meeting with May's youngest sister, Sheila Moiler, who alerted me to the archives in the Battye Library. These included, among other things, letters and reports May had written while attending the 1930 Assembly of the League of Nations meeting in Geneva. May Holman had been appointed Australia's substitute delegate to the meeting. This was her first and only journey overseas.

In 1995 I published a collection of her private letters to family, together with the public reports of her experiences of her journey to Geneva commissioned by the Melbourne Herald Group, as *Remarks of an Inexperienced Traveller Abroad*. I was very taken with two things. One was the way both the letters and the reports revealed much about May as a curious, excited and inexperienced traveller. The other was the coincidence that she, like me, had attended a life-changing international forum. In September 1995 I attended the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. When we returned, we Western Australian delegates published a view of our experiences and observations. The idea to publish in this way was directly inspired by May Holman's reflections on her 1930 trip to Geneva.

There were many parallels between May Holman's parliamentary life and mine. Although I entered parliament six decades after she did, we were both members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. We shared a commitment to ensuring occupational health and safety for working people. While in the Western Australian State Parliament I spoke out frequently on that broad topic of women's interests, condemning all forms of violence against women and children, promoting an idea for paid housework, advocating research into HIV/AIDS, promoting peace, and suggesting ideas for making Parliament House what we would now call a family-friendly workplace. And like May Holman and every other Australian woman MP, I too suffered sexist taunts.

The early research I undertook about May gave wonderful glimpses into her life. Her younger sisters Sheila Moiler and



Eileen Thomson loved her dearly and were very happy to think that their sister, who died too young, would be remembered through a biography. They remained very proud of their big sister and recognised her place in history. Evelyn Coverley and Frances Shea were her young friends and colleagues and spoke warmly and fondly of the woman they knew. As I remember, each acknowledged that despite May's competence, it was hard for her. She had a commitment to family and to working people that in many ways took over her life. Her father was a hard man whom none of the family could fully understand, even though the two sisters in particular respected him for his life's work. He was such a dominant father and politician that even though Katherine, their mother, played an active leadership role in women's politics, it was hard for her daughters to give an adequate picture of who she was.

A few years ago I asked Lebbie Hopkins if she would consider reading my collection of May Holman papers with a view to writing her biography. I am so pleased she agreed and am delighted with the imaginative way she has used and added to that material to produce this book.

This long-overdue biography pays tribute to May Holman's contributions to Western Australia's political and industrial history, and brings her to life as a woman we would want to meet and know.

Dr Judyth Watson

## PROLOGUE

‘May Holman? Now that name’s vaguely familiar. Who was she? Isn’t there a building in Perth named after her?’ These are the kinds of responses I’ve had from Western Australians during the writing of this biography. Even those committed feminist women who staffed the Women’s Information and Referral Exchange in Perth during the 1980s and 90s, housed as it was in the May Holman Building, can produce only the sketchiest outline of her life when pressed.

And yet in the 1930s May Holman was a household name in Australia. She made history in 1925 when, at age thirty-one, she was elected to the Lower House of the Western Australian State Parliament in a by-election to fill the vacancy in the seat of Forrest left by the death of her father, John Barkell Holman. She was the first Labor woman ever to sit in an Australian parliament, and, unlike Edith Cowan whose stint in parliament lasted only three years from 1921 to 1924, May Holman was re-elected five times and remained in parliament for fourteen years until her untimely death by accident in 1939. We ought to remember her.

May Holman was vivacious and stylish, intelligent and articulate. Even before her election to parliament she was widely known in Perth circles as a brilliant musician and talented stage performer. Like her parents, she was a committed member of the Great Labor Family and quickly emerged as a leader in her generation. Her responses to the turbulent social and political periods that marked her lifetime – the Great War from 1914 to 1918 and the worldwide Depression of the early 1930s – give some indication of her calibre as a leader. Rather than succumbing helplessly to the devastating

effects of the social disruptions that marked both of these periods, May Holman set out to make lives better for those worst affected. During the Great War and into the 1920s she assembled and led a hugely popular concert troupe of young women and men, known as The Entertainers, whose performances saw soldiers off to war and raised funds for worthwhile causes at home. Throughout the Depression, as a parliamentarian and as a leader of Labor women, she fought fiercely for the appropriate implementation of policies providing sustenance and government support for destitute workers and their families.

During her parliamentary career she remained a woman of the people. The issues she campaigned on – education reform, health reform, occupational health and safety reform in the mills and timber industry, equal pay for women and men, employment for young people – were issues that affected all phases of the daily lives of Western Australian citizens. During the 1930s, after the terrible hardships of the Great Depression, May Holman became intensely interested in bringing joy and intellectual nourishment to Labor women throughout the nation. The political slogan originating during the 1912 textile workers' strike in Massachusetts – *Hearts starve as well as bodies, Give them bread but give them roses* – may well have been hers. But her campaigning was not confined to ensuring the wellbeing of women and children. She was a formidable industrial advocate and, at the beginning of her career, she quickly established a reputation for intelligent and meticulous research and preparation when she gave the Second Reading Speech to introduce the widely acclaimed Timber Industry Regulation Bill.

None of this information would have been known to me without the intervention of Dr Judyth Watson. Judyth herself has had a distinguished career as a Labor politician. She was elected to the Western Australian Parliament in 1986 and served under the premiership of Dr Carmen Lawrence as minister for Aboriginal affairs, multicultural and ethnic affairs and seniors from 1991 to 1993, and as minister for women's interests from 1992 to 1993. She remained in parliament until 1996. During her parliamentary

career she became fascinated by the life of May Holman and researched it thoroughly, intending to write her biography. However, the writing process seemed daunting, and, a decade later, she invited me to take on the project. I'm so glad I did. I remain indebted to Judyth and her former staff for the extensive archive they have entrusted to me. And we are all indebted to those friends and members of May Holman's family who agreed to speak with Judyth and who supplied photographs, newspaper clippings and fascinating insights into the life of their famous relative and friend.

May Holman was a much loved public figure. But, as I have discovered in writing this biography, she was a complex and contradictory figure. She was intensely loyal and dignified, but also high-spirited and full of fun. She was sophisticated and charming and a brilliant scholar, but loved simple pleasures like having sing-alongs around the piano, and chatting in the kitchen over a cup of tea. She adored family life but, unlike most of her siblings, she did not create a conventional family of her own. She was widely admired for her immense energy and yet was plagued by ill-health and spent months at a time confined to her bed. She worked towards the creation of a new social order where poverty was eradicated and where women were seen as full human beings, but did not see herself as a radical or as a feminist.

When May Holman was killed in a car accident in 1939, the outpouring of grief across the nation was extraordinary. Press reports suggest that people everywhere responded personally to the news of her death and were genuinely heartbroken. John Curtin called her life *magnificent*. He acknowledged that her life was unfinished and inspiring. *Let her story, then, be woven into the tasks we will endeavor to do and in the lives we each have yet to live*, he wrote in a eulogy in 1939. *Let us take up the work that has been left yet unfinished, preserve the good that has been done, and in that way give fullness and completion to the glorified life of Miss Holman.*<sup>1</sup>

Seven decades later, it's time to remember her again.

Dr Lekkie Hopkins, Edith Cowan University

## CHAPTER 1

### HERE SHE IS!

May Holman pauses beside her mother at a side door to the chamber of the Legislative Assembly. It's just before three o'clock on the afternoon of Thursday 30 July 1925, and the ceremony to open the second session of the Twelfth Parliament of the State of Western Australia is about to begin. When she is sworn in this afternoon as the new member for Forrest, Miss Holman will become the first Labor woman in the nation to take a seat in parliament. She knows she is making history. She knows, too, that she is following in the footsteps of her beloved father, John Barkell Holman, whose unexpected death in February has rendered the seat of Forrest vacant.<sup>1</sup> She is thirty-one years old, younger by three decades than her trailblazing predecessor in this parliament, Edith Cowan.<sup>2</sup> We can imagine that she gives an involuntary shiver as she takes her mother's arm to enter the House.

Miss Holman's election has certainly captured the public imagination. Rarely has a routine opening ceremony of this parliament attracted so much attention.<sup>3</sup> High above her, the public galleries are packed. Curious onlookers spill over into the press gallery. The mood is festive. Necks crane and people jostle for position to watch the ceremony unfold. They see the speaker of the House enter in his wig and exotic regalia to occupy the one plush seat at the top of the room. They watch as the forty-nine members of the Legislative Assembly – all men – file in to take their places at two long tables facing the speaker's chair. They note the hush as the sergeant-at-arms announces the arrival of



The glamorous young Miss Holman.

the governor. But it is the glamorous young Miss Holman they have come to see.<sup>4</sup> Excitement makes them reckless. When her name is called for the swearing-in ceremony, those at the back abandon decorum and stand on their chairs to get a better view as she sweeps into the room to stand before the governor.<sup>5</sup> From the public galleries an excited whisper goes up: *Here she is! Here she is! Here she is!*<sup>6</sup>

*I could hear them and I felt terrible, she later confessed to a journalist, but all that is past now.*<sup>7</sup>

On that same afternoon May Holman gave her maiden speech in the Legislative Assembly as the address-in-reply to the governor's opening address. In a manoeuvre that was to become characteristic

of her parliamentary manner, she began by warmly congratulating the government on its successes outlined in the Governor's speech, but then launched almost immediately into a plea that her listeners recognise the terrible conditions under which the timber workers in her electorate lived and laboured. The issues she raised – the need for an adequate basic wage, the need for legislation to ensure the health and safety of timber workers, the need for protection of foreigners in the timber industry, the need for improved sanitation, better housing, better water supplies, better medical services, better roads, better educational opportunities<sup>8</sup> – reflected concerns that threaded their way through her parliamentary speeches for the next fourteen years.

The public responded warmly to her parliamentary debut. Journalists reported that the politicians and the crowds in the public galleries were impressed. On 31 July *The Daily News* noted that the new member for Forrest *was attentively listened to throughout her twenty minutes effort and fervent applause marked the end of her remarks.*<sup>9</sup> The *Brisbane Worker* was even more explicit about the differences between what people were expecting and what they experienced, reporting that she drew most effectively on her father's reputation and on her own industrial experience to highlight the ongoing plight of the timber workers in her electorate. *It was thought in some quarters that the young lady might be no more than a novel adornment of the House, but now she is seriously regarded as a fine acquisition. May is of a refined, unobtrusive temperament, but she has had practical industrial experience, and should give a splendid account of herself as she gains confidence in her new sphere.*<sup>10</sup>

Those of us looking back at this history-making day from the vantage point of the early decades of the twenty-first century must surely wonder how it was possible for a woman of thirty-one to have acquired the confidence, the skill, the reputation and the nerve to chart such new territory for women, to successfully stand for election as an industrial advocate to a seat in parliament with a primarily male constituency. As we will see when we look closely

at her family background and her own early experiences, May Holman was certainly an exceptionally intelligent and gifted young woman with an unusually specific suite of life experiences that equipped her well for the task that lay ahead. But it's too tempting to assume that hers was a lone voice in a sea of silenced and timid women. If we turn our attention to the activities of women from several generations and all walks of life in the Western Australian city of Perth in the mid-1920s, we begin to hear a cacophony of voices, some raised loud in anti-war protest, some demanding kindergartens and maternity hospitals in persuasively well-modulated tones, others weary from their behind-the-scenes battle to ensure the basic wage for women, some strident in their claims for equal pay for equal work, others loudly proclaiming the necessity of overthrowing capitalism, and still others asserting their independence as doctors, lawyers, journalists, teachers, nurses, poets, writers, seamstresses, shop assistants, factory workers, clerks, fashionistas. May Holman was unusual in charting new territory in the parliamentary sphere, but she was not alone, as a woman, in her social and political activism.

The world May Holman inherited as a young woman growing up in Perth was a world peopled with outspoken, determined, strategic activists – women and men – of her parents' generation. It was also a world of unevenly distributed privilege: some families lived in comfort and luxury in mansions lining the Swan River; others, like the families of timber workers in May Holman's electorate, lived in hovels with no sanitation, no access to clean water, and intermittent access to adequate health care. The Holmans were a staunch Labor family, and May's own mother, Katherine, emerged as a leader in Labor women's organisations from the early 1900s, working voluntarily alongside colleagues like Jean Beadle<sup>11</sup> and Ettie Hooton,<sup>12</sup> whose lives were dedicated to ensuring that women were included in the implementation of the great Labor ideals.<sup>13</sup>

The Labor women's organisations so dear to Katherine Holman's heart coexisted with, but remained largely separate from,



the other influential women's groups that made up the social and political movement that we know, in hindsight, as the first wave of feminism.<sup>14</sup> The 1890s had been a particularly fertile period for women lobbyists in Western Australia. In 1900, after a long and carefully crafted campaign from three related women's groups established in the 1890s – the Women's Christian Temperance Union,<sup>15</sup> the Karrakatta Club,<sup>16</sup> and the Women's Franchise League<sup>17</sup> – Western Australian women were granted the right to vote.<sup>18</sup> Many of the women involved in the campaign for the franchise in Western Australia – Edith Cowan, Lady Madeleine Onslow, Emily Hensman, Lady Eleanora James – were educated women, well-connected to the colony's administration and to the conservative side of its political life.<sup>19</sup> By the time May Holman entered the parliament, they were aged in their fifties and sixties: they were clearly generationally and politically distinct from the young Miss Holman.

As a Laborite, May Holman was primarily concerned with bringing dignity and justice and a redistribution of wealth to the working classes; hers was clearly a party-aligned political process. In contrast, the women of the Karrakatta Club were determinedly non-party-aligned, and less interested in reforming the existing social order than in ensuring that women's needs were taken care of, whatever their social position. In this respect they were politically more conservative than May Holman; but the impact of their activism on the everyday lives of Western Australian women should not be underestimated. The issues that continued to concern them were social justice issues that went far beyond demanding the vote, and included women's right to access to the professions and to public life, to adequate reproductive health care, to just divorce laws, and to lives free from violence. The motto of the Karrakatta Club (*spectemur agendo*: let us be judged by our actions) emphasised that theirs was a practical idealism.<sup>20</sup> Throughout her adolescence and early adulthood May Holman must surely have been aware of the activities of the Karrakatta Club and the related Women's Service Guilds,<sup>21</sup> presided over by the indomitable self-

avowed feminist Bessie Rischbieth<sup>22</sup> and co-founded in 1909 by Edith Cowan and Dr Roberta Jull.<sup>23</sup> She would have been in sympathy with their peace activism, and their defence of the rights of marginalised groups such as prisoners and prostitutes, and no doubt she would have admired their work in establishing crucial services for women and children in Western Australia, including the kindergarten system and the King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women.

For at least three decades before May Holman's entry into parliament, then, women had played an active role in publicly working for social change in Western Australia. There was no shortage of women lobbyists for May Holman to admire. She knew she was entitled to take her place in public life. But unlike the activist women of the previous generation and indeed of her own generation, May Holman eschewed the feminist label, seeing herself rather as a member of the Great Labor Family.<sup>24</sup> As John Curtin wrote in his tribute at the time of her death in 1939, *Her outlook was governed by the conviction that men and women are joint sharers of life's purpose ... [and] fellow victims of injustice.*<sup>25</sup> Within the party itself, although she shared her mother's interest in Labor women's organisations, May Holman's political supporters were not primarily women. Rather, as we shall see, her early engagement with her father's world of trade unionism and party politics meant that for much of her young adult life she was the single woman in a company of men. And as a young woman, she worked alongside her father as a son might. When her father died, she set out to carry on his work. Her commitment was to the party process beyond an exclusive commitment to women's issues.

Herein lies the strange anomaly of May Holman's parliamentary success. The only other women elected to any Australian parliaments in the decade of the 1920s – Edith Cowan in Western Australia and Millicent Preston-Stanley in New South Wales – were quickly seen solely as women representing women's interests, and each lost her seat after serving one parliamentary term. In stark contrast, May Holman was seen to be carrying on her father's

industrial reform agenda and held her seat of Forrest through five elections until her untimely death in 1939.

Edith Cowan, it seems, encountered hostility throughout her parliamentary term. Nobody was quite prepared for her entry into parliament in 1921. The legal bar to women entering the parliament was removed by legislation in 1920, after determined lobbying by Edith Cowan and her activist associates: she was one of five women candidates in this election, and ran a short election campaign. Like most of the other members of the Karrakatta Club, Edith Cowan was not immersed in a party process before her entry into the parliament, and she stood for election under the umbrella of the governing Nationalists, not because she was necessarily in sympathy with all their policies, but more because she took seriously their claim to be a non-party organisation.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, she had no existing body of supporters in the parliament. The men did not quite know what to do with this eloquent, intelligent and forceful woman who refused to dance to their tune. She had a tough time on the floor of the House: she was considered abrasive and lost the sympathy of her Nationalist colleagues almost immediately by refusing to vote with them, insisting that her constituents were the women of Western Australia, not the Nationalist supporters. Nor did the press know how to respond: during her election campaign Mrs Cowan was accused of being *a disgrace to women* and of *heartlessly neglecting her husband and children*. At the time, her youngest child was thirty, and her husband was out campaigning for her.<sup>27</sup> As a member of parliament she was admired for her success in opening the legal profession to women through introducing the Women's Legal Status Act 1923 as a private member, but she was frequently derided, and from the beginning she was lampooned by cartoonists.

By 1925, when both May Holman and Millicent Preston-Stanley stood for election, the public was fascinated with how women parliamentarians coped with what today we would recognise as sexism. The left-wing press was especially interested in observing how they fared. An amusing story recounted in the *Westralian*

*Worker* gives us a glimpse of the quick-witted Millicent Preston-Stanley, and of an appreciative crowd. It relates to a meeting in Townsville, where she was speaking outside, from the back of a lorry. “How would you like to be a man?” an interjector called out. ‘How would you?’ was the prompt reply, which (so the story goes) caused discomforture to the man, and joy to the crowd. There were no further interjections.<sup>28</sup>

But although Miss Preston-Stanley received some very favourable press at the time of her election, less than a couple of months into her parliamentary term *The Australian Worker* was predicting that she would serve one term only.<sup>29</sup> And just three months later, that same newspaper reported with grim satisfaction that *Miss Preston-Stanley receives more courtesy from her Labor colleagues in the Parliament than from the members of her own party, which only coldly welcomes her.*<sup>30</sup>

May Holman, however, entered the parliament on an entirely different footing. The welcome she received in the Women’s Sphere pages of the *Westralian Worker* on Friday 10 April 1925 set the tone for much of what was to follow:

*Congratulations are pouring in to Miss May Holman, MLA, who, having won the selection ballot for Forrest, has been returned unopposed for that seat. In this respect she shares the distinction with her late father, who won Forrest under similar conditions. “Long may she reign” is the wish of all who know her. That she will fill the bill is the opinion of all whom writer has come in contact with. Miss Holman knows the timber industry better than most of the officers of the Australian Timber Workers’ Union: she knows the personnel of the union. Also she knows the intricacies of the award, of the union rules, and of every detail of the management of the organisation. In parliament the timber workers will have a capable representative, and their wives and youngsters will have an ardent advocate. When it comes to getting grants and concessions from Ministers, who is more likely to be*

*successful than Miss Holman? Every Minister has known her from girlhood, and it is safe to say each is delighted with her success. Perhaps it would be wrong to say she will be welcomed into Parliament with open arms, but one can at least predict that both sides will express more than formal pleasure when she takes her seat. Of her many good qualities none is more outstanding than her happy knack of making friends, and within twelve months, if a vote were taken in Parliament for the most popular member, the result would be Miss Holman an easy first. Although she is not the first woman to be elevated to a seat in the Legislative Assembly, she is the first Labor woman to have that honour, and further she is the first Labor woman to take a seat in any Australian Parliament.*<sup>31</sup>

It was not unusual for the newspapers of the day – *The West Australian*, *The Daily News*, *The Sunday Times*, the *Westralian Worker* – to carry stories of women’s social and political activities. What was unusual, perhaps, was this article’s assumption that a young woman – any young woman – would be so warmly welcomed into the all-male parliamentary sphere. But May Holman was already a well-known and much admired public figure, and her supporters were accustomed to seeing her operate at her father’s side. In the months after her father’s death but before her admission to the House, she was often in the news. The broad scope of her activities is evident in the publicity she received. After the flurry of articles commenting on her election to the seat of Forrest, *The Sunday Times* on 5 April published a flattering synopsis of her career as an entertainer.<sup>32</sup> Later, on Friday 1 May, the *Westralian Worker* published a feisty letter from May Holman in defence of her late father’s reputation as a staunch advocate for the Timber Workers’ Union. *My father earned his salt and so do I*, she wrote, *and I am sure that the timber workers as a body know that, from the hour my father entered their service, he spared neither health nor strength in fighting and working for their interests. His*

*record in this respect cannot be besmirched by any innuendoes Mr Hughes is courageous enough to make over a dead man's tomb ...*<sup>33</sup> On Saturday 2 May she opened the new Cottesloe sports oval;<sup>34</sup> and on Sunday 3 May she spoke before a crowd of one thousand people at the May Day rally at the Esplanade in Perth, expressing her support of a resolution to *abolish the capitalist system with its policy of production for private profit, and pledge itself to work for the establishment of a state of society wherein the means of production will be socially owned and operated for the benefit of all members of the community.*<sup>35</sup> In her speech she stressed that bloodshed would not be necessary, because transformation could be achieved by constitutional means.

Here then we have a young woman who is already an intriguing public figure. She is outspoken in her defence of her late father's reputation; she is politically revolutionary in her call for the end to capitalism and simultaneously pacifist in her insistence on avoiding bloody battle; and she is well known as an industrial advocate for the timber workers. But she is a curiosity, as the crowds at the opening of the parliament suggest. She is a woman, but she has been her father's *right hand man*.<sup>36</sup> She is a woman, but she is seen as his *political heir*.<sup>37</sup> She is a woman, but, as we have seen, she is perfectly positioned to take her place as a member of that exclusive men's club, the State Parliament. She's a woman, but her interest in the parliamentary process is genuine and her constituent base much broader and deeper than that of her two parliamentary sisters. It's no secret that she adored her father and was delighted to follow him and his much-admired predecessor, Peter O'Loughlen, into the parliament as the member for Forrest. Soon after her father's death she commented to a journalist on the *Westralian Worker*, *When I was a little girl there were two people in the world I thought were perfect – my father, and Peter O'Loughlen.*<sup>38</sup> But these heroes are dead and she finds herself as the lone woman in the parliament. To whom does she look for inspiration and guidance?

Enter Katharine Susannah Prichard. Of all the women who

were politically active in Perth in the 1920s, it was she who shared, specifically, May Holman's idealistic desire to seek genuine structural change through the overthrow of capitalism. In hindsight, Katharine Susannah Prichard emerges as a formidable dame of left-wing politics, a founding member of the Communist Party in Australia, and an internationally recognised and lauded literary figure.<sup>39</sup> But in the mid-1920s, although she had already seen some journalistic and literary success, her greatest works were still ahead of her, and her local reputation revolved around her success as an orator and political idealist.

Like May Holman, Katharine Prichard was an anomaly in conservative Perth. She was a political radical plunged into a deeply conservative milieu. Although throughout her life a segment of the community remained deeply suspicious of her,<sup>40</sup> she was renowned amongst her acquaintances for being readily able to befriend all who came into contact with her.<sup>41</sup> She had arrived in Perth from Melbourne in 1919 to live with her dashing young husband, Hugo Throssel, local war hero and beloved son of a former conservative state premier. At the time, two major industrial disputes – one on the Kalgoorlie goldfields and the other on the Fremantle waterfront – were reaching their climax. Trades Hall was flying a red flag, and Kalgoorlie miners who'd been arrested for striking were being brought to Perth for trial. These were politically turbulent times. The wharfies' strike in May 1919 resulted in the conservative Colebatch government ordering mounted police to advance on the barricaded strikers. One striker was killed and seven were wounded. Katharine Susannah Prichard, as one of the first Marxists to arrive in Perth, was quickly in demand as a public speaker. Her talks on the waterfront with the striking workers earned her wide admiration. Everyone listened to her. Her international outlook meant that, for her Perth audiences, the struggles of local workers were now linked to struggles of workers around the world.<sup>42</sup>

Katherine Susannah Prichard was ten years older than May Holman, much closer in age than many of the other activist women

May Holman could have been seen as role models. In a city as small as Perth in the 1920s,<sup>43</sup> the two women could not have avoided knowing of one another. The young May Holman would surely have been enchanted. Here was a woman not much older than she, articulate and intelligent, fearless in her expression, who, even after joining the Communist Party in 1922, was simultaneously able to command the respect and admiration of those who met her, conservative and radical alike. Perhaps, for a young woman like May Holman, raised in the grudges and the barbs and the adversarial traditions of the trade union movement and the Labor Party, there was something here to learn.

For her part, Katharine would surely have admired the younger woman for her determination, her courage, her grace. She'd have known old Jack Holman as a fierce Labor man and trade unionist, uncompromising, intolerant of opposition, and, at times, violent. She'd have known the stories of the uproar he'd created in the parliament a decade or more ago when in a fit of rage at being gagged, he grabbed the speaker by the collar and threatened to hurl him out of the House. She'd have heard, too, of his eldest daughter's adoration of him and of her shared allegiance to the Labor cause, so that when Jack Holman died suddenly, Katharine would not have been as surprised as she otherwise might have been that young Miss Holman committed herself to the work he had begun and ran for election to the seat he'd vacated.

History does not relate whether the two women were confidantes. But in a fascinating twist of historical coincidence, their stories are forever linked by the publication, in 1926, of two internationally significant documents, each born of these two women's respective passionate concern with the plight of the timber workers in Western Australia. Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel, *Working Bullocks*, set in the karri forests of the South-West, detailed the appallingly harsh existence and living conditions of the timber workers and their families, and was considered by literary critics to be groundbreaking in its articulation of social conditions. It was hailed internationally as the first properly Australian modern



novel.<sup>44</sup> And in that same year, May Holman's Timber Industry Regulation Bill, presented to the Western Australian Parliament in July, rightly received international acclaim for its meticulous outlining of measures to improve the occupational health and safety of timber workers. May Holman's attention to the detail of every stage of the process, from the research and drafting of the bill through to seeing its safe passage through the parliament, ensured that this is still held to be the greatest achievement of her fourteen-year parliamentary career.

Both May Holman and Katharine Susannah Prichard were intimately familiar with the lives they were writing about. For the past three years Katharine had visited the karri country often to gather material for her novel. She and her baby son had lived for long stretches with the timber workers and their families; she had felt the damp, the cold, the dark. She knew firsthand that timber cutting and mill work were dangerous. She knew the despair of women whose husbands were injured, and the rage of men whose livelihoods were threatened if they protested.

We know that May Holman read and admired *Working Bullocks* for its vivid portrayal of life in the timber country. The critic H. M. Green wrote of it as having ... *a kind of warmth and glow which seems to be a reflection of heat and light and the colour-effects of the landscape.*<sup>45</sup> Drusilla Modjeska, in her research into Australian women writers of the period, records that as early as 1925, writer Louis Esson wrote to colleague Vance Palmer that he and Hilda Esson were reading the manuscript of *Working Bullocks* and found it *astonishingly good. It is most unconventional, and it is less like an ordinary story than like actual life. You feel you are living in the karri forests.* On reading the novel himself, Vance Palmer wrote excitedly to the poet Frank Wilmot: *I hope the book gets a good spin in Australia, for something tells me it marks a crisis in our literary affairs.*<sup>46</sup> Nettie Palmer shared their excitement, giving it a more detailed assessment:

*Working Bullocks seems to me different not only in quality but in kind. No one else has written with quite that rhythm, or seen the world in quite that way. The creative lyricism of the style impresses me more than either the theme or characters. From slang, from place names, from colloquial turns of speech, from descriptions of landscape and people at work, she has woven a texture that covers the whole surface of the book with a shimmer of poetry ...*<sup>47</sup>

But May Holman was also deeply attuned to the daily lives of the timber workers. It's a measure of her admiration for their resilience, perhaps, that Miss Holman felt that the novel did not do justice to the courage and tenacity of the real workers whose struggles are fictionalised here.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, *Working Bullocks* had clearly shone a spotlight upon the desperate living conditions of the families eking out a living in the timber country. Attention such as this must surely have been useful to May Holman's campaign to make their lives safer.

For more than a decade before the preparation of her Timber Industry Regulation Bill, May Holman had been immersed in the arcane world of the Timber Workers' Union. In 1910, aged seventeen, she went straight from school to Trades Hall to work directly with her father, who was at that time secretary of the Timber Workers' Union. For much of the Great War period she was employed elsewhere; but in 1918 she returned to work with her father as his personal clerk, gaining invaluable experience at his side in the state and federal arbitration courts as a trade union advocate. Her intense interest in timber workers' conditions meant that she was now ideally positioned to bring to fruition her father's preparatory work on a parliamentary bill to regulate the timber industry.

When on 19 October 1926 May Holman gave her Second Reading Speech for the Timber Industry Regulation Bill to her Western Australian parliamentary colleagues, it took two and a

half hours to deliver. We know that its content is a history of every facet of the industry, a history of the international development of occupational health and safety legislation, and an account of timber-cutting at that time. Her research for this bill was characteristically detailed and thorough. She cited information from Australia – Queensland, Victoria, South Australia – as well as New Zealand, England, Switzerland, and the states of Arizona and Washington in the United States of America. The detail of her argument demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the daily lives of workers. She recounted information from the timber mills at settlements throughout the forest with an ease that speaks of close familiarity:

*At Holyoake the accident rate is very high. Returns put in to the Arbitration Court showed that over one particular period there were 51 accidents over 12 months among the 104 men who were employed there. There are records of accidents in which the men's hands were caught in ropes or their legs were jammed ... Also there is a bad stretch of line. It was badly laid and on one occasion the men had to get off the train and pack the sleepers with bark. During stormy weather trees may fall across the line or washaways may occur ... At Nanga Brook there were 16 accidents in five months among the 80 men employed there giving a percentage of 47. At Nanga Brook bush landing seven accidents occurred within four months among the 45 men employed there. Regarding the accidents at Pemberton, the details I have were compiled from the doctor's figures. These show that from March 1925 to May 1926 there were 83 accidents including 13 on the group settlements, seven on railway construction and 63 at the mill. There are about 200 men employed at the mill and the percentage of accidents worked out at about 25. The small benches have guards and covers for the saws but the big benches have not.<sup>49</sup>*

She argued that inspectors were badly needed in the industry, concluding: *As the Minister proved the other night, the inspection of machinery in this industry is practically nil, and there is no protection for the men who operate the saws and woodworking machinery.* Ultimately, in her attempts to persuade her fellow parliamentarians to support her bill, Miss Holman was strategically modest in her appeal for a small measure of protection for workers. In a manoeuvre that became characteristic of her parliamentary demeanour, the tone of her appeal – moderate, reasonable, measured, sensible – tempered the passion she brought to her defence of her constituents, and invited reciprocal compassion from her fellow parliamentarians based in a common concern for the wellbeing of Western Australian citizens: *Any member who considers the terrible percentage of accidents in this industry will, I am sure, not refuse his assistance to get those men a small measure of protection.*<sup>50</sup>

It is extraordinary enough that two such groundbreaking documents detailing the lives of timber workers in the South-West of Western Australia – one a novel, the other a crucial piece of legislation – should emerge from the pens of two activist women in Perth in 1926, at a time when women were only just beginning to take their places in the public arenas of literature and parliamentary debate. It would be more extraordinary still, surely, if these two documents emerged completely independently of each other.

Katharine Susannah Prichard would no doubt have supported Miss Holman's proposal to regulate the industry through legislation: machinery inspections must be compulsory; the safety of workers in mill and forest must become the primary obligation of employers. These were crucial issues in the struggle for workers' rights, and it was important that the bill that eventually went before the parliament was thoroughly researched and forcefully argued. Given Katharine Prichard's intense interest in the party political process, and her concern for the plight of the timber workers and their families in May Holman's electorate, why would

she not suggest they meet? Surely she would want to offer support and encouragement to the younger woman.

Let's imagine them in a tearoom in West Perth in the winter of 1925, in the year May Holman first takes her seat in parliament. Here they are, two women seated at a table beside the window. Katharine is pleased that May has accepted her invitation to meet. She smiles, congratulates, calls for tea. Today she wants to offer support and encouragement to the young woman seated across the table. They have much to discuss.

Initially their talk is of the parliament, of the honour of being the first Labor woman elected here, or, indeed, anywhere in this vast country, of the thrill of entering the parliament for the first time.

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. And so Katharine tells her about her awakening to the wider world of radical politics, first as a young journalist in 1908 when she was sent to London to cover the Franco-British exhibition for the Melbourne *Herald*. This taste of cosmopolitan life exhilarated her, and in 1912, aged twenty-nine, she returned to London, hoping to find ways of living professionally and independently in the comparative freedom of that city. She acknowledges to May that life was hard, but that it was a life full of the passionate exploration of ideas. She became part of a circle of artists and writers, and embarked upon a systematic study of socialist ideas, which provided a fertile context for her later study of Marxism. At this time, too, she became an outspoken pacifist: from childhood she had felt that war was wrong, but her pacifism was confirmed when she travelled to northern France and saw at firsthand the atrocities of war.

As a writer, she tells May, the climax of her London stay came in 1915 when she won the prestigious Australian section of the Hodder & Stoughton All Empire novel competition with *The Pioneers*. For this she won two hundred and fifty pounds, a

considerable sum, and with renewed confidence in her Australian future as a radical writer, she says, she returned to Melbourne. Here, in spite of her clearly articulated controversial views, she was warmly welcomed back by her family. It was here that she gained the love and support she needed to continue her political work. The crucial turning point came in 1917. She was greatly affected by news of the Russian Revolution. ‘That the revolution was an event of world-shaking importance, I didn’t doubt,’ she tells May. ‘Press diatribes against Lenin, Trotsky and Bolshevism indicated that they were guided by the theories of Marx and Engels.’ She sips her tea and laughs in anticipation of the story of her own audacity. ‘I lost no time in buying and studying all the books of these writers available in Melbourne. Discussion confirmed my impression that these theories provided the only logical basis that I had come across for the reorganisation of our social system.’

May is fascinated by the combination of playfulness and passion in the older woman’s story. Katharine looks directly at her, eyes alight. ‘My mind was illuminated by the discovery,’ she continues in a rush. ‘It was the answer to what I had been seeking: a satisfactory explanation of the wealth and power which controlled our lives – their origin, development, and how, in the process of social evolution, they could be directed towards the wellbeing of a majority of the people, so that poverty, disease, prostitution, superstition and war would be eliminated.’ Katharine pauses, glances out the window to the wintry world outside, then turns her gaze once more upon her companion. The gaiety of the moment before is gone. She’s reflective, sombre now. ‘The works of Marx and Engels all made such sense to me,’ she says. ‘Here at last was a blueprint for life: peoples of the world would live in peace, and grow towards a perfecting of their existence on this earth.’<sup>51</sup>

May listens intently. She is not new to idealism, nor to political talk. Her own family life has been immersed in it. Her very earliest memory has political overtones: she pictures her father

riding his bicycle home to their little house in the goldfields at Cue, bottle in one hand, drunkenly celebrating his win for the miners in a stoush with employers. Family history relates that he had won yet another round of the battle and whisked his wife around the room in a celebratory dance, with three year old May still safely in her mother's arms.<sup>52</sup> May recalls images, smudges, smells: her mother's face glowing with surprise and delight; a spinning room; a whoosh in her head; the smelly breath of her beloved father as he bellowed his joy. But May is captivated now by Katharine Susannah's gentle manner and generous ways. Perhaps here there's something for her to learn. Perhaps one can be committed without being divisive or aggressive. Perhaps ...



As the afternoon light fades into a wintry dusk, we'll leave them there now in the tearoom, heads bent together, talking earnestly and animatedly. The extraordinary contributions of these two women to political life in Western Australia have earned them each an honoured place in history. But information about the detail of their everyday lives in the 1920s is relatively slight. Did such a meeting ever occur? History does not relate. What we do know, though, is that they shared that *happy knack of making friends* noted so enthusiastically by the journalist in the *Westralian Worker* of 10 April 1925. In political terms, what this means is that when we look back at their political lives, we see that they shared an unusual strength in shunning adversarial politics in favour of the politics of cooperation and reconciliation. Without ever resiling from their firmly held ideals, each was able to command the respect of her political opponents and supporters alike.



If, as we might suppose, these two women did meet to discuss their political passions, we must also suppose that Miss Holman's

admiration for Katharine Susannah Prichard would have been tempered with apprehension about her political strategies. Although Katharine herself was warmly admired in Perth circles, the Communist philosophy was not. Meeting with her in a public place may have been a risky undertaking for this first Labor woman parliamentarian. Rather than openly courting Communists, Labor parliamentarians, especially those closely aligned with the trade unions, had been at pains to establish distance from them. May was keenly aware of this. In 1923 her father John Barkell Holman brought a libel suit against *The Sunday Times* Publishing Company for alleging that he was a Communist. The suit was widely reported in newspapers around the nation. In October 1923 a special jury, that is, one drawn from *a class which usually belonged to a certain political section which was believed to oppose the Labor Party*,<sup>53</sup> awarded him damages and costs. An appeal before the Full Court eight months later was lost and Holman was paid three hundred pounds and costs. Most importantly, Jack Holman's reputation remained officially untainted by Communism. As is clear from the newspaper coverage of the case, public attitudes in Australia in this period following the Great War often aligned Communism with treachery. Katharine Susannah Prichard may well have been inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917, but for the majority of Australians this event was hazy and dark: accounts of its violent upheaval of an established order induced fear rather than admiration. During the libel trial, Jack Holman was required to prove his distance from Communism by vouching for his own and his family's patriotism, as the excerpts from newspaper reports of the case make clear. On Wednesday 17 October 1923 the South Australian newspaper *The Register* reported that:

*In the Supreme Court [in Perth] today, before Mr Justice Burnside and a special jury, a case was commenced in which J. B. Holman, secretary of the Australian Timber Workers' Union, claimed damages from The Sunday Times Publishing Company for libel alleged to be contained in a*



*Federal Election paragraph which appeared in that paper on November 9, 1922, stating "Carpenter has pulled out of the contest for Fremantle. This will [leave] it to Hedges and Watson to down the co-unionist candidate. Perhaps you did not know that Holman is a member of the disgruntled council of action which is affiliated with the Moscow revolutionaries. It is true that the workers of the east are deserting the council; but that does not alter the fact that Holman had gone the whole hog for the German-made conspiracy against British industry and survival."*

*Plaintiff gave evidence that he and his son offered themselves for service in the Great War; but were rejected, and his daughter endeavoured to enlist as a nurse. Witness also took the platform in support of conscription.*

*The case stands part heard.<sup>54</sup>*

The next day, Thursday 18 October 1923, Melbourne's daily *The Argus* carried a similar report under the heading *Union Official Sues Newspaper*.<sup>55</sup> *The Brisbane Courier* also got into the action, reporting from Perth on 16 October under the headline 'Libel Action. Election Sequel. Union Secretary Sues Newspaper' that Mr Holman considered his reputation had been damaged by the libellous claim that he was a Communist supporter.<sup>56</sup> As with the initial reports of the case, this article emphasised that Jack Holman had proffered as evidence of his unquestioned loyalty to King and country the fact that he and a son and daughter had all offered themselves for war service but had been rejected. For the twenty-first century reader, the foregrounding of his nationalism and loyalty provides a glimpse of the abhorrence with which Communist sympathies were regarded in Western Australian society at that time.

So controversial was this case that *The West Australian* of Friday 19 October 1923 ran a long and detailed article entitled 'Holman Libel Claim: Third Day's Hearing: An Editor's View', in which an exchange between Mr W. Dwyer, lawyer for Holman,

and Alfred Thomas Chandler, editor of *The Sunday Times*, was outlined. The Supreme Court debate as recorded in this article centred around whether or not Chandler meant to defame Jack Holman by calling him a Communist, and the relationship between avowed Communists, trade unions and the Australian Labor Party. Precisely ninety years later, it's impossible not to be fascinated by the discussion of the libellous nature of being called a Communist. As revealed in the following excerpt from that Supreme Court debate, Mr Dwyer's argument that, in the popular imagination, Communists were guilty of *advocating the overthrow of Parliamentary Government*, was by implication a self-evident horror:

*His Honour asked, what is the harm in calling a man a Communist? Mr. Dwyer said that if the word were construed in the dictionary sense the use of it would not be libellous, but the "Sunday Times", as its articles indicated, used it in a different sense which meant a good deal more.*

*"He means a Nihilist, anarchist, of some other 'ist'?" his Honour suggested.*

*Mr. Dwyer said that the word as generally accepted meant more than the dictionary meaning. It meant a man advocating the overthrow of Parliamentary Government.*

This same account of the Supreme Court debate examined in some detail the extent to which the Trades Union Congress of 1923 and its Council of Action could be seen to have been affiliated with Communism:

*Cross-examination proceeded on the subject of the Melbourne Trades Union Congress. "Conference on two occasions," Mr. Dwyer put it, "threw out resolutions that would overthrow the authority of Parliament." "Yes," witness returned, "but they adopted the revolutionary preamble."*

*Asked what were his grounds for asserting the affiliation*

*of the Council of Action with “Moscow revolutionaries,” witness cited “the affirmation of the revolutionary preamble at the Melbourne Congress at which the Council of Action was appointed”: the fact that on each of the two councils there were declared Communists – Messers. Garden and Howie – both of whom visited Moscow: and the statement, already quoted, from “Smith’s Weekly” [of 11 November 1922, in which Mr A. C. Willis, secretary of the Council of Action, was quoted as saying that at the Congress “Communists were to join up with the ALP”].*

*The witness was still in the box when the court adjourned till this morning.<sup>57</sup>*

The case was still being reported on Saturday 19 October 1923 in the *Adelaide Advertiser*. Mr Philip Collier, leader of the Labor opposition in Western Australia, spoke in Holman’s defence, so reinforcing the public perception that Communists were traitors deserving of condemnation, and strongly arguing that neither Jack Holman nor the Labor Party was aligned with them.



May Holman knew her father’s view on the need to be distant from the radicalism of Communists. But Jack Holman was now dead and his daughter was a parliamentarian in his stead. She might be taking on his seat, but her tactics were her own. She would chart her own path. In her first couple of terms in parliament it seems she embodied Labor philosophies and political stances. As we have noted, in the mid-1920s when she entered the parliament she might well have been a man, her father’s son rather than his beloved daughter.

But later, in the 1930s, after her horizons were widened by European travel and international experience, and after the rupture caused by the terrible hardships of the Depression in the early 1930s, we see a new sense of independence emerge in May

Holman's political views. In this period of her life she crossed paths often with Katharine Susannah Prichard,<sup>58</sup> and found her fascination with Russia's social and educational policies to be thought-provoking, at times challenging. She was especially fascinated by the notion that the promotion of pacifism in schools could be adopted as public policy.<sup>59</sup> A deep respect for Katharine Susannah Prichard, in combination with a respect for the views of women she had met at the League of Nations meeting in Geneva in 1930, would perhaps begin to explain May Holman's outspoken defence of freedom of speech and freedom of political allegiance in the 1930s, when Communism was on the brink of being outlawed, and when most Labor parliamentarians were afraid to speak in defence of such freedoms. Hansard records her saying to the parliament in 1932: *I understand there is now a possibility of the setting up of a reserve police force to deal with these terrible Communists. But I say the people of this State, when unemployed and hungry and suffering unjust conditions, should not be characterised as Communists merely because they kick and refuse to be treated like dogs.*<sup>60</sup> Further, in the lead-up to the Second World War in the late 1930s, May Holman held to what she called the *Great Peace Ideal* and opposed conscription: not always a popular stance within her beloved Labor Party, but a stance she took nevertheless. Was she influenced in these views by an ongoing respect and admiration for the pacifism of Katharine Susannah Prichard?

We know that Katharine Susannah Prichard emerged as a leader of the radical left in Perth and in the late 1930s gathered a group of intelligent women around her – Margaret Green, Irene Greenwood, Jean Beadle – to establish the Modern Women's Club in Perth in May, 1938.<sup>61</sup> We know, too, that May Holman became a deeply respected leader of Labor women, but this does not explain her independence of thought and action in the 1930s. Perhaps it is enough to argue that the very presence of the more radical but widely respected Katharine Susannah Prichard in Perth made it possible for May Holman as a young woman in parliament to remain fearless in her determination to fight injustice for workers

and for other oppressed groups wherever she found it. The meeting in the tearoom in West Perth that we imagined would have been at the very beginning of May Holman's life as a parliamentarian. If she were to seek womanly support for her parliamentary career, she would certainly have to seek it outside the House. She was to remain the only woman in the parliament in Western Australia for the next eleven years until the election of the conservative Florence Cardell-Oliver to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1936. Miss Holman's long stint as a woman member of parliament was as unusual as her initial election to the parliament itself. In 1935 she was celebrated widely as being the only woman ever to have served a decade in parliament not just in Australia but indeed in the British Empire.<sup>62</sup>

May Holman remained the only Labor woman in the Western Australian parliament until her sudden death in 1939. The issues she campaigned on – education reform, health reform, occupational health and safety reform in the mills and timber industry – were issues that affected all phases of the daily lives of Western Australian citizens. She remained passionate about ensuring the health, comfort and wellbeing of the men, women and children in her electorate throughout her parliamentary career. As a reformist politician, it seems, she had few aspirations to grandeur. Hers was a temperate, practical idealism. People respected her for her hard work, her generosity, her willingness to engage fully in the worlds of the people she represented in the parliament.

But wait: this picture of her is altogether too serious. Far from being unequivocally earnest and restrained, May Holman had a warm and vivacious personality for which she was widely admired. We've already noted her style as she swept into the chamber of the House to be sworn in as the Member for Forrest in July 1925. Add to this a certain *je ne sais quoi* – a presence, a sense of fun, a love of frivolity and of performance, all of which we'll see more fully as we explore her life as a young adult during the Great War and afterwards – and we begin to understand the affection she generated in the hearts of those who knew her. As we shall see, her

HERE SHE IS!

sudden death in 1939 left a devastated circle of family and close friends and caused a bewildered grief in the wider community for which nobody seemed prepared.



The seasoned politician: Miss May Holman arriving for the opening of Parliament, 1936.