

## THE MAGNIFICENT LIFE OF MISS MAY HOLMAN

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YEAR LEVEL: Y7–10

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Sustainability

### ABOUT THE BOOK

Throughout the 1930s May Holman was a household name and an inspiration to the women of her generation. She made history in 1925 when, at age thirty-one, she became Australia's first female Labor parliamentarian, holding the seat of Forest until her untimely death on the eve of the 1939 elections.

A woman who fought tirelessly for the rights of those in her electorate, her accidental death received national coverage with thousands of Western Australian mourners lining the streets to pay tribute. May Holman charted new territory for women, but the barriers she encountered and her methods of overcoming them still resonate today.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Lekkie Hopkins is a feminist academic in the Women's Studies program in the School of Psychology and Social Science at Edith Cowan University. Her professional background is as an archivist, radio broadcaster, oral historian, literary critic and teacher. She is particularly interested in the history of social protest and in exploring creative ways to undertake and present academic research.

### THEMES

- Active citizenship
- The struggle for gender equality in Australia during the early twentieth century
- Representative democracy and governance
- The history and ideology of the Australian Labor Party

### AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM LINKS

Y7–10 Civics and Citizenship

Y7–10 History

Y7–10 English

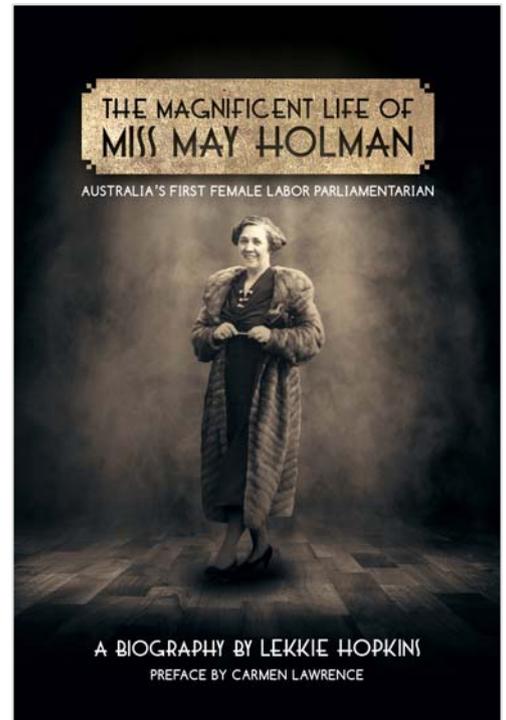
### USEFUL WEBSITES

- Parliamentary Education Office: <http://www.peo.gov.au/teaching.html>

### CLASSROOM IDEAS

#### Discussion questions

1. How would you describe May Holman? What qualities did she possess that helped her to be an effective politician and leader?
2. What role do you think May's parents might have played in her decision to become a politician?
3. Which cornerstones of Labor ideology do you think May embodied most strongly throughout her career?
4. At what points did her opinions diverge from Labor ideology? Why?
5. Why do you think May was able to maintain her seat in parliament for such a long time, while other pioneering women in the political sphere (such as Edith Cowan) were not?



6. In your opinion, what was May's most significant achievement during her time as a Labor parliamentarian?
7. May was one of the first women to enter parliament and was met with scepticism by some of her contemporaries. She encountered sexism in the workplace as she endeavoured to conduct her political duties.
  - Do you think sexism is still present today? Give an example.
  - Are there any careers in which you are reluctant to enter because of your gender?
  - How can we best combat gender inequality?
8. In the final chapter of this biography, the author states, *We have much to learn from May Holman* (p. 206). Do you agree? What lessons have you learned through reading about her life and legacy?
9. *Cross-curricular priority: Sustainability* – May Holman is perhaps most famous for her role in researching and framing the *Timber Industry Regulation Bill*, which went before parliament in 1926. She was concerned with improving the conditions for the timber workers, as well as limiting the wasteful nature of the industry to preserve areas of the forest for future generations.
  - What is the current state of the timber industry in Australia?
  - What percentage of Australian forests have been destroyed?

## Creative writing

1. Research the living conditions of rural timber workers in May Holman's district during the 1920s and 30s. Write a short story about your life as a settler and your meeting with May Holman during one of her campaign visits to your home.
  - What challenges do you face in your day-to-day life, and what will you ask her to do about them?
  - Will you vote for her to be re-elected? Why/why not?
2. Imagine you are selected as a member of the Australian delegation to attend the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva in 1930 along with May Holman. This is your first trip overseas. Research the route and daily life experienced on board sea voyages to Europe during this period. Write an imaginative letter home to a loved one, describing your travel adventures.
  - What social, political and/or economic issues will you discuss in Geneva?
  - How will your opinions be strengthened or changed by your experiences there?
  - At what ports will you call on your journey, and how will your interactions with other cultures inform or alter your views on key social issues back in Australia?
3. Do you think that Australia needs a government? Why/why not? How might society be different if we didn't have one? Write a short story envisaging this scenario.

## Debate/exposition writing

In teams of three, debate the validity of one the following claims:

1. 'Voting should not be compulsory in Australia.'
2. 'Even though she did not explicitly identify as a feminist, May Holman was undoubtedly one.'
3. 'Hearts starve as well as bodies.' –*May Holman*
4. 'As May Holman argued – conscription is a violation of basic human rights and should never again be implemented in Australia.'
5. 'It is better to have a government that makes decisions based on the opinions and ideas of only one person (a dictatorship).'
6. 'May Holman could not have been as successful in her political career if she were a man.'
7. 'Gender discrimination will always exist in the workplace.'
8. 'Travel broadens the mind: it is an antidote for ignorance, bigotry and prejudice.'

## INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR LEKKIE HOPKINS

### ***Why do you think it is that the life of May Holman has not been documented to date?***

During the 1970s when women around the world were agitating for women's rights in what we now call the second wave women's movement, Australian feminist historian and author Dale Spender famously said that 'women have been hidden from history'. What she meant was that most historians were men who were trained to think about history in certain ways that privileged the public world of wars and governments, and ignored the private world of domestic life and of everyday interactions. The lives of women, and indeed the lives of the men and women of the working classes, were considered to be irrelevant to the 'important' task of

recording history. This all changed when feminist historians began to reclaim women's stories and to write history from the point of view of women in the 1970s and beyond. At about the same time, oral historians began to reclaim the stories of the working classes, gathering told stories instead of depending only on the formal public written records of affairs of state and politics to write history. As you can imagine, this has meant huge changes in the ways we think about history and what it can do.

May Holman was one among many women in Western Australia and throughout the nation who agitated for improvements in the lives of women and the working classes in the first half of the twentieth century. I think it's taken us so long to write her story simply because there's so much catching-up to do. Most of us now know about the life of Edith Cowan because there is now a university named for her, but until then, she too was hidden from history. Let's hope that May Holman's name will become more familiar to Western Australian school students with the publication of this book.

***Do you think that Australian politics has changed since May Holman was a parliamentarian? Do you think it is possible for a State parliamentarian to still be connected to their constituents in the way that May clearly was?***

Yes, I do think politics has changed since May Holman's time, and I think it would be almost impossible for a contemporary politician to be as strongly connected to the people in their electorate as May Holman was to her constituents.

May Holman's entire parliamentary life was dedicated to improving the lives of people in her electorate of Forrest and in the broader community. She knew every family in her seat of Forrest, and was welcomed into their houses like a friend. Their troubles became her own. She lobbied endlessly for improvements in their working conditions, their housing, their health and their schooling.

In the 1920s and 1930s when May Holman was in parliament, the population of Perth and Western Australia was much smaller, and public figures like May Holman and her parents were well known to everyone through newspapers and through their strong involvement with what we call the Great Labor Family. The Labor Party to which they belonged influenced almost every aspect of their lives: Labor people – men and women – worked together and played together. Their great task – to bring justice and fairness and rich lives full of opportunity to working people by the peaceful overthrow of capitalism – was taken very seriously indeed. In Labor circles there was a great emphasis on education and political discussion and debate, and Labor families played sports together, made music together, held dances and picnics together, and supported each other in hard times.

May Holman was already much loved by Labor people as the daughter of her very well-known parents before she entered the parliament. Add to this the fact that she was also well known and much admired in Perth circles as a young and very talented entertainer, and we have someone with whom the electorate expects to have a personal connection. History tells us that they loved her and she loved them in return. Today we simply don't expect to have the same kind of close and personal relationship with our politicians. □□□

***What do you think we can learn today from May Holman's experiences as a female parliamentarian?***

May Holman was certainly aware of what today we would call sexism in the parliament. As the only woman in the House, she was aware of the privilege that her male colleagues simply assumed and that remained invisible to them. It would have been easy for men with these strongly held unconscious biases against women in public life to ridicule and dismiss her as a parliamentarian. In looking back on her parliamentary life, we can list a number of strategies she used to ensure that she was taken seriously in the House.

1. She conducted herself with dignity and with intelligence throughout her parliamentary life.
2. She was always exceptionally well-prepared for whatever speeches she made in the parliament, and refused to waste the time of the House with irrelevant comments or idle chatter. She quickly won the respect of members of all political persuasions for her articulate speeches and her sound common sense.

3. She was a great performer and seemed to view the parliament as a kind of theatre. This probably helped her to distance herself from the barbs and dismissive comments that sometimes came her way. Her greatest asset in refusing to be rattled by her detractors was her sense of humour. She often used humour and wit to counter the puerile arguments of her opponents.
4. She focused on the task at hand – fighting for a better world for her constituents – rather than on her own stature as a politician. She remained fiercely loyal to her constituents and to representing them in the parliament.
5. She was a great storyteller and used vivid imagery to bring to life the everyday world of her constituents. This was a fairly unusual strategy at the time.
6. She appealed to the goodness and fairness of her parliamentary colleagues in every passionate appeal she made to enhance the wellbeing of her constituents.

In spite of her admirable parliamentary record, though, we know that she was never elevated to the position on Minister even after fourteen years in the parliament, which suggests strongly that even her own colleagues remained sexist in assuming that women were not capable of holding positions of great public responsibility.

Whether May Holman herself would ever have identified these as strategies to counter endemic sexism is something we cannot know for certain.

***What drew May Holman to your attention as the subject for a biography? Did your perspective on May Holman shift as you undertook research into her life?***

When Judyth Watson invited me to continue with the research she had begun and to write May Holman's biography, I was initially drawn to the task because I have always been interested in the 1920s and 1930s – the two decades we now know as the inter-war years – as a period of history. It was a period of great change and enormous challenge. As often happens at times of deep social stress, it was also a period where the creative arts – in music, art, theatre, literature – flourished. May Holman was a fascinating figure to me because she seemed to combine the new world of women's participation in public life with the old world of revolutionary Labor politics.

As I discovered more and more about the detail of her life and about the emotional landscape she inhabited, I came to admire her intensely for her courage in the face of bouts of debilitating illness, and for her capacity to find ways to live out her ideals. In spite of her immense popularity, we glimpse from time to time a lonely figure whose life never quite took the shapes she might have expected it to.

***What is your favourite May Holman story?***

My favourite May Holman story has to be the story of her twenty-first birthday party, which begins Chapter 3: Honour thy father ... This was a wonderful story to write. I think you'll see why when you read it.



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