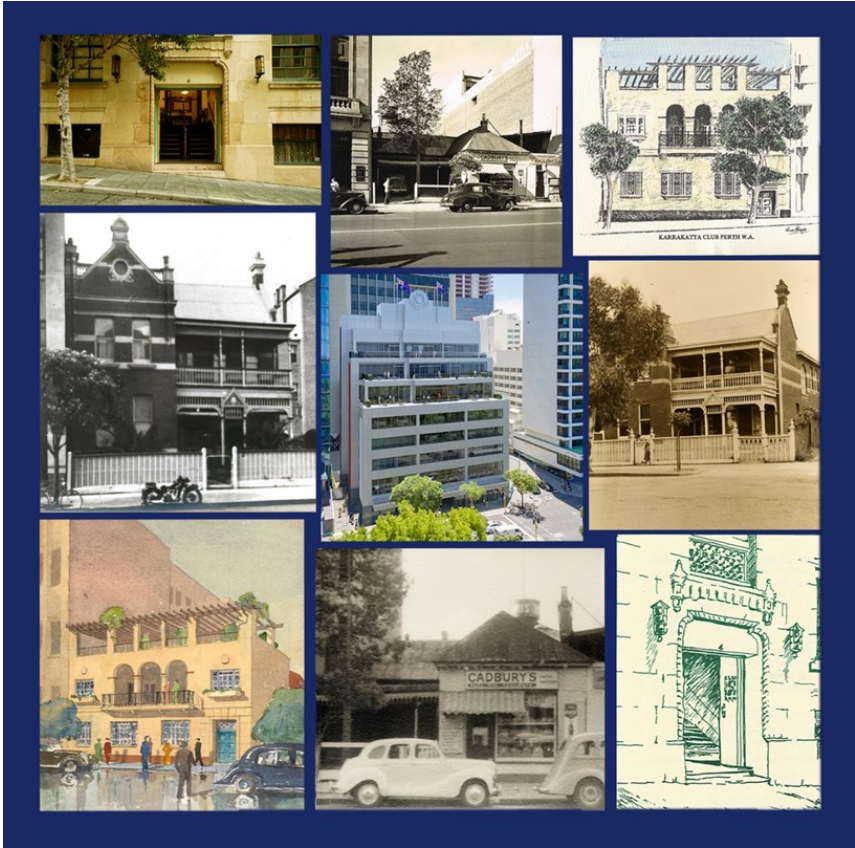




# KARRAKATTA CLUB HISTORY

Founded in 1894

Member of the Australian and International  
Associations of Lyceum Clubs



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Photos from the Karrakatta Club Collections

# Early History



*Lady Onslow  
President  
1894-1904*

## **Lady Onslow**

*Original photographer  
unknown.*

*Digital photo: Peter  
Flynn, Energy Pictures*

The Karrakatta Club is the longest established private Women's Club in Australia. It was formed by members of the St George's Reading Circle, at the suggestion of Dr Emily Ryder, a visitor from the USA. On October 4, 1894, a meeting chaired by Mrs Madeleine Onslow, (wife of the Chief Justice) agreed unanimously to form a club.

At a second meeting on October 24, 1894, the Executive was elected: President, Mrs, (later Lady) Onslow; Vice President, Mrs Hensman; Treasurer, Miss Helen Ferguson; Record Secretary, Mrs J

Cowan; Correspondence Secretary, Miss Amy Best. Note that married women were known by their husband's name - Mrs J. Cowan was, Edith Cowan.

Perth in 1894 was only just out of its struggling British Colony status, having achieved self-government in 1891, when its population was only 8,500. There was very little education available for women, and health care was primitive, with few hospitals and even fewer trained staff. There was still no electricity, little transport and only very slow communication.

But it was also a time of impending change. The gold rushes of the 1890s would bring huge increases to the population, including a rush of ideas from around the world. Newly arrived at self-government, the recent Swan River Colony would soon be asked to join the Commonwealth of Australia, and the call for votes for women would soon be heard.



**Pioneer members of the Karrakatta Club:** Mrs Lawrence, Mrs HD Holmes, Mrs JG Foulkes, Mrs James Cowan, Mrs Oct. Burt, Miss Helen Ferguson, Miss JA Nisbet, Mrs OL Haines. *Photo: Bartletto, Perth (Photographer) 1890s, Royal Western Historical Society*

## Aims of the Karrakatta Club

**O**ur early founders were remarkable women. Their aim was to bring women together into one working body for mutual improvement and social interaction. Dr Ryder said, “A women’s club will encourage women to think things out, and to come to a conclusion, to defend their opinions and have the courage to hold them”. The object of the Club, then, was to inform women, and help them find their voice. It was certainly radical.

After much discussion, the name ‘Karrakatta’ was chosen. It was thought at the time to mean, ‘Hill of Fire’, and adopted as a mark of respect to the traditional owners of the land. Mrs Cowan suggested the Club Motto, ‘Spectemur Agendo’, which translates as ‘Let us be judged by our actions’. It clearly shows the serious intentions of our founders.

# Advocacy

Information was to be provided through papers prepared and presented under the four Departments, chaired as follows: Hygiene, Mrs James; Literary, Miss Nisbet; Artistic, Lady Forrest and Legal and Educational, Miss Best. This preparation for public speaking was important in later preparing Karrakatta Club members for roles in many other organisations.

Members soon became interested in public questions of social and political importance at the time. These included the guardianship of children, payment of teachers, particularly equal pay, laws concerning divorce, intestate estates, assault, especially on children, kindergartens, and of course, Federation, and franchise for women. Never before had a permanently organised body of women taken on such subjects.

They advocated the provision of public libraries, and raised money to provide a bed for women at the Convalescent Home in Cottesloe. They advocated a woman Inspector for Aborigines, and the appointment of a woman to the Children's Court. The Women's Service Guild was formed largely by the efforts of the Karrakatta Club, and there were delegates to the National Council of Women.



Members gather and relax on Club day in the Edith Cowan Lounge.

*Photo: Dr Lesley Williams*

# Edith Cowan, OBE



**Edith Cowan**

*Original photographer unknown.  
Digital photo: Peter Flynn, Energy  
Pictures*

There were many notable and influential early members of the Karrakatta Club, but perhaps the most remarkable was Edith Cowan. 1861—1932. After a tragic early childhood, Edith Dircksey Brown was sent to a school in Perth run by the Miss Cowan sisters. When she was 18, she married their brother, James Cowan. It was a very successful partnership, and there were five children.

Edith is best known for being the first female elected to an Australian Parliament, winning the seat of West Perth in 1921. It was the result of a four

week campaign, with voluntary voting and opposition from both men and women. The Bulletin magazine produced derisive cartoons at her expense, and she was heckled mercilessly during her speeches. However, she had entered Parliament with extensive experience and leadership skills.

She was made a life member of the Karrakatta Club and had been awarded an OBE for her work during WW1, establishing the Welcome Soldiers Institute, which later became the RSLWA. She had fought for maternity hospitals and for trained midwives. She was one of the first women officers of the Children's Court, the first woman JP, the first woman in the Anglican Synod, and President of the National Council of Women.

In her time in Parliament, Edith Cowan achieved two private members bills. Her first success was the Amendment to the Administration Act, believed to be the first Bill ever introduced by a woman in any British Parliament. It allowed a mother to share equally with the father if a child died intestate, and was passed in 1922. Her second success was the Women's Legal Status Bill passed in 1923. It heralded a unique new path for women, allowing them entry into any profession. It was a major step forward in the empowerment of women.



Australian Association of Lyceum Clubs

## Lyceum Movement Affiliation and Reciprocal Clubs

**D**uring the early days of the Club, it was still not possible for a respectable single woman to dine in public, or to stay at a hotel. From its beginning, affiliations were formed with private women's clubs, around Australia and overseas. This access to beautiful private accommodation is still highly valued today.

In 1920, the Karrakatta Club joined the Lyceum movement, which began in the UK as a way of bringing together tertiary educated women around the world. Its aims were to provide intellectual stimulus and international understanding. UWA was still very new, and there wasn't a pool of women graduates to form a Lyceum, but it was recognised that the Karrakatta Club had been providing the desired stimulus for many years. Our affiliation was granted, and throughout the years members have had the opportunity to travel to international conferences and make friends around the world. We are still strongly connected to this movement. We also maintain reciprocal status with a select number of other national and international private clubs.





Lyceum presentation on level five, ANZAC House.

*Photo: Peter Flynn, Energy Pictures*

## Premises

It is inevitable that over such a long period, the Club would have a number of homes. The two most long-standing were 186 St George's Terrace, from 1923 - 1986, and 4 Sherwood Court, from 1986 - 2020. Both of these, owned by the Club, provided a dining room and accommodation. These aspects had become increasingly expensive to run, and were no longer necessary, so in 2020 we were delighted to be offered a beautiful space in the new ANZAC House, at 28 St George's Terrace. It allowed us office accommodation, the Edith Cowan lounge, and the Dr Roberta Jull meeting room. We have access to the beautiful ANZAC Club dining and function facilities, which have superb views over Government Hose Gardens to the Swan River and the South Perth foreshore. It is a truly impressive location.



ANZAC House, Perth.

*Image: MacCormac Architects*

# What do we offer today?

Since inception, the Karrakatta Club has provided weekly speakers, which over the years have settled into Literary, Artistic, Travel and General Lyceum departments. Each Department has a Convenor. We have interest circles, currently Bridge, Mahjong, Book Club, Art Focus, Movies and Gardening. Outside visits or excursions are provided regularly. Special occasions such as our Opening Lunch, Melbourne Cup, Birthday and Christmas functions are very well attended. The Club is a very friendly, welcoming place and membership growth is healthy.



Left to right: Edith Cowan Lounge; ANZAC Club restaurant and below, view of the river and St George's Terrace from level five balcony.

*Photos: Peter Flynn, Energy Pictures*

# Where to from here?

Our founders' aim was to bring together the women of the small Perth community in one working body. Of course, that is no longer possible. We are still, however committed to the cause of empowerment for women. Now our aim is to bring together groups of women, under many different umbrellas, to bring about change. We want to support their work, share our facilities, and use our collective voice for the betterment of society. There is still much to be done. Let us truly be judged by our actions!

