

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5543

Evans, Ada Emily

(1872 - 1947)

Born	17 May, 1872, Essex England
Died	27 December, 1947, Kurkulla New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Lawyer, Teacher

Summary

Ada Emily Evans began her professional life as a teacher, but later blazed a trail for women in the legal profession. In 1902, at the University of Sydney, she was the first woman in Australia to earn a Bachelor of Laws, graduating at a time when New South Wales law did not allow her to practise. She was admitted to the NSW Bar in 1921 after changes to the legislation, thus becoming the first woman to be admitted to the bar in New South Wales.

Details

Ada Emily Evans was born on 17 May 1872 in Essex, England. Ada and her family immigrated to Sydney in 1883. Her mother came from a legal family and Ada was convinced of the necessity for women lawyers to remedy the prejudices of the entirely male legal system. When Ada enrolled in the Sydney University Faculty of Law, the Dean, Professor Pitt Cobbett, would not accept women law students. Ada enrolled when he was absent on leave and could not prevent her entry. Upon his return, Professor Cobbett told Ada that ‘her frame was so light that she should become a doctor’. Nevertheless, Ada continued her studies and in 1902 became the first Australian woman to complete her law degree.

Ada Evans applied to be registered at the Supreme Court as a student-at-law. She was rejected on the basis that a legal practitioner had to be a “person of good fame and repute” and the legal definition of “person” did not include being a woman. From 1902 until 1918, Ada campaigned for her admission. During those years, she wrote articles on women’s issues for the Australian Star newspaper under the pen-name “A.L.B”, postulated to be an acronym for “a lady barrister”.

In 1918, legislation was passed to allow women to enter the legal profession in New South Wales. In 1921, Ada Evans became the first woman to be admitted to the New South Wales Bar. Ada never practised due to the lapse of time since her graduation, poor health and family commitments. Confident and intelligent, Ada Evans was also an expert pistol shot and golf player. She died at Kurkulla on 27 December 1947.

Published resources

Resource Section

Evans, Ada Emily (1872-1947), O'Brien, Joan M., 2006,
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/evans-ada-emily-6118/text10491>

Ada Evans Biography, Brodsky, Juliette, 2011,
http://www.nswbar.asn.au/the-bar-association/pioneering-women/#/1_ada_evans

Law, Kerwin, Hollie and Rubenstein, Kim, 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0624b.htm>

Thesis

A History of Women in the Legal Profession in New South Wales, O'Brien, Joan M., 1986,
<https://womenlawyersnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/History-of-Women-in-Legal-Profession.pdf>

Site Exhibition

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

Author Details

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