

KATE DWYER

Kate Dwyer, teacher, unionist, suffragist, health and education reformer, was born Catherine Winifred Golding in 1861 in the gold-mining community of Tambarooma in New South Wales. Kate was educated at the Hill End public school, and began teaching at the Tambarooma Public School in 1880. Teaching positions at Bathurst, Spicers Creek, Binnaway, Coffey Hill and Blayney followed until 1887 when she resigned to marry Michael Dwyer, also a teacher.

During the depression years of the early 1890s, Michael Dwyer was headmaster of the Broken Hill Public School, and Kate saw for herself the poverty caused by depression, drought and strikes. Her sympathies were aroused. The Dwyers were transferred to Sydney in 1894, and Kate became active in the Womanhood Suffrage League which fought for votes for women. In 1901, with this battle won, Kate established the Women's Progressive Association to work for the right of women to enter the professions, particularly law, and to have a fair share of the assets of the marriage partnership. Her sisters, Anne and Belle Golding, were also very active in political and social reform movements.

Kate was very active in politics and, in 1904, became first President of the Women's Organizing Committee of the Political Labor League. She was elected to the State Labor executive in 1905, and was a delegate to Commonwealth Labor conferences in 1908 and 1912. She wrote extensively on political, industrial and women's questions. An imposing figure, Kate was known as a fine public speaker with a gift for repartee. In 1915, she was asked to stand for the 1916 half-Senate election, but deferred, probably due to her active war work in other spheres. In 1925, she stood for the seat of Balmain for the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, but was defeated. However, she did confront Premier J D Lang when he failed to include child endowment and widows' pensions in his campaign.

These activities provided a platform for her tireless work to improve working and living conditions for women, including a minimum living wage. Kate was a founder of the Women Workers' Union for outworkers which aimed to combat sweated labour in the clothing trades. In 1910, she assisted A B Piddington in the Royal Commission into labour shortages and the conditions of women and juvenile workers. She visited more than 100 factories, and abhorred the conditions she found there and the iniquities of piece work.

Kate also had broader interests – town planning, education and health. In 1909, in giving evidence to a Royal Commission on the need to improve Sydney and its suburbs, Kate advocated model dwellings for working people with rents held at the equivalent of one day's pay. In 1911-13 she sat on the Royal Commission into food supplies and fish. During the First World War, Kate campaigned actively against conscription, and opened a factory to provide for unemployed women and secured a contract making army uniforms. She represented the Women Workers Union on Wages Boards and in the 1920s was a member of conciliation committees. In 1921, she became one of the first women Justices of the Peace in New South Wales.

Kate Dwyer was a member of the Senate of the University of Sydney between 1916 and 1924, and campaigned for a chair of Domestic Science, reflecting feminist efforts to emphasise that work in the home, while unpaid, was as important, and as complex, as paid work¹. Kate was the mother of five children and it is unsurprising that the health of women and children was also a focus of her advocacy. She was a director of the Royal Hospital for Women at Paddington in Sydney, the Renwick Hospital for Infants and the Scarba Home for Children. She was a trustee of the King George V and Queen Mary

¹ McMurchy, et al, *For love or money*, p 43.

Jubilee Fund for Maternal and Infant Welfare, similar to organizations in all the other states established to promote the scientific and systematised rearing of infants.

Kate did manage to fit some recreation into her busy life. She was a keen gardener and an avid reader. She was a devout Roman Catholic all her life. Kate Dwyer died on 3 February 1949. Sadly, three of her children pre-deceased her².

Other women worked as governesses to the wealthy, and many opened their own schools.

² H Radi, 'Kate Dwyer', in Radi, p.74.