

EMMA MILLER

Emma Miller was born into a Chartist family in Chesterfield, England, in 1839. The early influence of Chartism influenced her to live and die a rebel. She adopted her creed from the writings of Tom Paine: The world is my country; to do good is my religion. Emma believed that, if conscience is satisfied, unpopularity should not matter and that 'respectability' was a matter of acting in humanity's interests.

Emma experienced many hardships and tragedies in her early adulthood. She eloped with her first husband, Jabez Silcock in 1857. They had four children. After her husband's death, Emma supported her family by sewing for seventy hours a week. Emma married William Caldrewood in 1874, and they migrated to Brisbane in 1879. William died in 1880. Then followed marriage to Andrew Miller in 1886. Andrew died in 1897.

Emma became very prominent in the women's movement. She founded a women's union in 1890 which advocated equal pay and votes for women. Emma became the first woman member and a life member of the Brisbane Workers' Political Organisation. Still involved in the clothing trade, Emma gave evidence to the Queensland Government's Royal Commission into shops, factories and workshops in 1891 and exposed 'sweaters' and their exploitation of women workers.

Emma Miller was foundation president of the Woman's Equal Franchise Association between 1894 and 1905. The vote for women in State elections was finally won in 1905; women had had the right to vote in Federal elections since Federation, and voted for the first time in the 1903 Federal election. The *Worker* praised Emma for her years of tireless and trusted leadership, and her energy and enthusiasm which would 'put women half her age to shame'. In 1905, Emma was sixty-six. The *Worker* further proclaimed that 'wherever Progress has needed a faithful worker or an earnest voice she has been there every time'.

The Women Workers' Political Organisation was formed soon after Federation to capture the women's vote for labour at the 1903 Federal election. At the age of 65, Emma declared: 'I am only beginning to live'. She retained her feisty spirit. On 2 February 1912, known as Black Friday, at the height of a general strike, Emma led a contingent of women to Parliament House, avoiding police with fixed bayonets. The women were charged by baton swinging police on their return from Parliament House. Emma reputedly stuck her hatpin into a horse ridden by the Police Commissioner, Patrick Cahill. Cahill fell from his horse and claimed to have been permanently injured.

Direct political action was not Emma's only cause. She was anti-militarist and opposed conscription in World War I. She believed that 'those who make the quarrel should be the only ones to fight'. As vice-president of the Women's Peace Army, Emma attended the Peace Alliance Conference in Melbourne in 1916. She also fought hard for free speech and civil liberties. During the First World War, Emma preached equal pay to those fearing that women would take the jobs of men away at the war.

Emma died in Toowoomba on 22 January 1917. The flag at Trades Hall in Brisbane flew at half mast, and there were glowing tributes in progressive newspapers. A bust of Emma Miller, funded by public subscription, was unveiled at Trades Hall on 22 October 1922.

Emma's courage and spirit, despite age and frailty, endeared her to her followers. She was proud to be known as the Grand Old Woman of Queensland Labour and as 'Mother Miller'¹.

¹ P Young, *Proud to be a rebel. The life and times of Emma Miller*, Brisbane, UQP, 1991.