

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Organisation

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The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria

(1885 -)

Born 16 November, 1885, Melbourne Victoria Australia

Occupation Lobby group, Religious organisation, Women's Rights Organisation

Summary

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria was founded in 1887 when the 12 existing local branches in Melbourne suburbs and regional Victoria joined together to form a Colonial Union. It is primarily dedicated to promoting total abstinence from alcohol and other harmful drugs and all members sign a pledge to this effect. Under its broader agenda of 'home protection' and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and in its belief that the dangers of alcohol could not be tackled in isolation, the WCTU has pursued a very wide-ranging reform agenda mostly relating to the welfare of women and children. Importantly, influenced by its sister organisation in the United States, the Union became a major supporter of the campaign for women's suffrage in Australia as it was believed that power at the ballot box was the only way to achieve their goals. While at its most influential in the years up to WWI, the movement continues today.

Details

The first local Union was established in Victoria in 1885 and the movement grew rapidly. The Victorian Union was founded largely due to the efforts of Marie Kirk and the Rev. Philip Moses who arranged the first Organising Conference in 1887. The foundation president was Mary Love, who had been a member of the Union in the United States prior to her move to Melbourne in 1886. At its first Annual Convention in 1888, the Union outlined its operational agenda of 'Organisation, Preventive Work, Social Work and Educational Work.' By 1891 it had 57 branches.

By 1890 the Victorian Union had also committed itself to the suffrage cause: passing a resolution that: 'As men and women are alike in having to obey the laws ... they should also be equal in electing those who make the laws; and, further, that the ballot in the hands of women would be a safeguard to the home, in which the interests of women are paramount, and as what is good for the home is also good for the State, the enfranchisement of women would be conducive to the highest national welfare.'

In 1891 the Union sent a deputation to the Premier who responded cautiously that in order for him to take any action on the matter there would need to be united and representative agitation on the part of women. The Union thus approached the other two suffrage societies to discuss combined action. It was decided to launch a vigorous effort to gather signatures for a petition. They began a massive door knocking campaign which captured much attention. Never before had such large numbers of women taken to the streets in common cause. 30,000 signatures were collected and presented to parliament. The Union was instrumental in the formation of the Victorian Woman's Suffrage League in 1894.

The Union has also been involved in a range of other issues and causes. It was one of the first four groups to affiliate with the National Council of Women of Victoria in 1902. From its inception, the Union became concerned with children's welfare. It campaigned for reforms in the 'boarding-out' system and the appointment of inspectors and the raising of the age of consent for girls from 12 to 16 years. In 1909 it established Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria Kindergarten in Richmond, with an associated School for Mothers which held lectures by doctors and had visiting nurses. This was the first such institution in the State and was a forerunner of Baby Health Centres. The Kindergarten closed in 1953, but was reopened as an Occupational Centre for Mentally Retarded Children. From its earliest years it has also run a children's branch, the Loyal Temperance Union.

From its earliest days, the Union has also been interested in the welfare of working-class 'girls', forming Clubs for Girls and offering affordable accommodation and meals at various hostels and its headquarters.

Other issues tackled by its various Departments of Work included prison reform, Aboriginal welfare, sex education, film censorship, early childhood education, peace and arbitration. In recent years, the WCTU has turned its attention to drug education, anti-smoking and gambling strategies and to the campaign against drink-driving.

Published resources

Book

Forward in faith : an historical record of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union covering the years 1947-1973, Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1975

Woman suffrage in Australia : a gift or a struggle?, Oldfield, Audrey, 1992

One of Australia's daughters : an autobiography, Cowie, Bessie, 1900

Golden jubilee, 1887-1937, 1937

For God, home and humanity : a history of the Geelong City Union of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1888 to 1988, Pargeter, Judith, 1988

Youth Book of Citizenship Service, 1933

The Busy Woman's Home Companion, 1924

From Vision to Reality: Histories of the affiliates of the National Council of Women of Victoria, 1987

Report

Annual convention reports / the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria (Inc.), Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria., 1956-

Women's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria. Peace Department and Local Association, [1889]

Oral evidence presented on behalf of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria...: to a Board of Inquiry into the operation of the Liquor Control Act 1968 at Melbourne, Bergon, M A, 1977

Annual Report, Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria, 1887-2001

Book Section

Post-war women reformers and Aboriginal citizenship : rehearsing an old campaign?, Holland, Alison, 1999

Reading the silences: suffrage activists and race in nineteenth century settler societies., Grimshaw, Patricia, 1999

Religion and public life : Catholic women for this world and the next, Massam, Katharine, 1999

Temperate Feminists: Marie Kirk and the WCTU, Hyslop, Anthea, 1985

Edited Book

Australian Feminism: A Companion, Caine, Barbara, Gatens, Moira et al., 1998

Journal Article

Colonising motherhood : Evangelical social reformers and Koorie women in Victoria, Australia, 1880s to the early 1990s, Grimshaw, Patricia, 1999

Sex education debates and the modest mother in Australia, 1890s to the 1930s, Warne, Ellen, 1999

Temperance, Christianity and feminism : the woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria, 1887-97, Hyslop, Anthea, 1976

A Mission to the Home: The Housewives Association, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and Protestant Christianity, 1920-1940, Smart, Judith, 1998

A sacred trust: Cecilia Downing, Baptist faith and feminist citizenship, Smart, Judith, 1995

'For the good that we can do': Cecilia Downing and feminist Christian citizenship, Smart, Judith, 1994

Prowlers in the darkened cinema: Australian church women's associations and the arrival of the motion picture in Australia., Warne, Ellen, 2000

Women Citizens of the New Nation: Reading some visual evidence, Quartly, Marian, 2002

Thesis

The 'Woman Question' in Melbourne, 1880-1914, Kelly, Farley, 1983

Conference Paper

Christian women and changing concepts of citizenship rights and responsibilities in interwar Australia, Smart, Judith, 1999

Newsletter

The White Ribbon Signal: Official Organ of the Woman's Temperance Union of Victoria, 1891-1931

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives

[Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria](#)

Australian Historic Records Register

[Woman's Christian Temperance Union of Victoria Inc. : community organisation records](#)

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