

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: PR00393

O'Donnell, Ellen

(1896 - 1963)

Born 1 January, 1896, Ipswich Queensland Australia

Died 31 December, 1963, Queensland Australia

Occupation Policewoman

Summary

In 1931, Ellen O'Donnell, along with Zara Dare, became Queensland's first female police officer, serving with the service for nearly 31 years. As Ellen was never officially sworn in as an officer, she did not wear a uniform or receive officer's wages. She also was never part of the superannuation scheme. Her duties were restricted to assisting lost children, escorting female prisoners, and working with victims of domestic and sexual violence. Queensland's decision to allow female officers into the police service was extremely controversial, with opinions divided across the state.

Details

The National Council of Women of Queensland (NCWQ) in 1911 drew attention to the need for women and girls in Queensland to be better served in matters of crime. There were no female police officers in Australia at the time and the NCWQ called for women, experienced and educated in social work, to be given the status of police officers. The appointment of two female police in New South Wales in 1915 was not enough to encourage the Queensland Commissioner of Police William Cahill to follow suit. By 1917 Queensland was the only state without female police. Newspapers and community groups began asking why. The Queensland Country Women's Association (QCWA), the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Brisbane, James Duhig, the NCWQ and the Queensland Women's Electoral League (QWEL) all called for the appointment of women in policing.

It was not until Irene Longman was elected to State Parliament in 1929 that the opposition to female police began to be broken down. As past president of the NCWQ and a member of the QWEL, Irene made a submission to cabinet in 1930, outlining the necessity for women to handle sensitive cases such as children, girls and women who have been involved in sexual assault cases. Although the decision was not unanimous, Cabinet consented to the appointment of women in the police force.

Ellen O'Donnell, along with Zara Dare, accepted the offer of positions and the women were based at the Roma Street police station. When the time came to review their appointments and make them permanent, the Police commissioner William Ryan stated that they were well paid for the job they were doing, and although there was nothing under the *Police Act 1898* to stop them from being sworn in, he considered that their swearing in would reduce the number of male police constables by two. Ellen kept her job by agreeing not to be sworn in. She never received the pay allowances and privileges of her fellow police, nor superannuation.

The NCWQ continued to lobby to have Ellen and Zara made permanent, but Police Commissioner Ryan made it clear that if they were not satisfied, they were free to resign at any time. Ellen remained in the force until her retirement in 1962, working the entire time at Roma Street police station. Queensland police women were eventually sworn in three years after Ellen retired – in 1965.

Published resources

Resource

50 Firsts: Queensland Policewomen at Work, Queensland State Archives, 2009,
http://queenslandfirsts.org/01_cms/details.asp?ID=39

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book Section

Ellen O'Donnell and Zara Dare: Queensland's first policewomen, Grant, Heather, 2005

Resource Section

O'Donnell, Ellen, Grant, Heather, 2009,
<http://www.women.qld.gov.au/q150/1930/index.html#item-ellen-odonnell>

Book

Journey to equality: an illustrated history of women in the Queensland Police, Prenzler, Tim, Jones, Lisa, Ronken, Carol, 2001

Archival resources

Queensland State Archives

[Administration File, police](#)

[Police Service File](#)

Author Details

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