



Emma Miller (1839 - 1917)

Audio transcript

Emma Miller did a great deal to change things, and get the vote for women. I'm sure she was very good looking when she was young. She had three husbands, and so clearly somebody found her good looking! And she's got rather sad eyes if you look, and she had every reason to be sad really.

She had a very tough life. Her childhood took place among the dark, satanic mills of Northern England. Her father was a poorly paid rope maker, a labour supporter, who took Emma along with him to trades union meetings and marches. Like most working class girls, she left school at 14, and then she had to help her parents feed a large family. In her day, there were no scholarships for girls who were clever as she was, and so she had to sew shirts for a living.

Her first husband died when she was young, and she had to support three children by sewing shirts, working from home, 11 or 12 hours a day for a pittance. She married again, this time to a stonemason, and in search of a better life, she migrated to Brisbane with her second husband. It was 1890.

Queensland was emerging from a long drought. There was widespread unemployment, so it wasn't really much of a better life, and she had to work in a garments sweatshop, and there in the sweatshop, working long hours a day, not even allowed a place to go and sit and eat her lunch, but forced to eat at the machine, she organised marches of women to demand the vote, in order to get better working conditions.

The other thing she wanted was redress against sexual harassment of young women in these sweatshops by the male supervisors. She spoke with conviction - really the parliamentarians didn't know how to deal with her. She led a march of women on Parliament House, not a dangerous ramble, an orderly meeting, but they bring the police horses onto the marchers to control them, and she becomes famous as a rebel.

Does anyone know how?

The answer is a hatpin.

The mounted police are advancing on them. Faced with this line of mounted police, she takes the hat pin out of her hat. Now I'm a horse lover, I don't approve of sticking hat pins in horses' sides. But she does, and she stops the police advancing on them, the policeman falls off the horse, the line breaks, and so the women can go on and present their petition to Parliament.

And so when she dies, she dies in her 90s, the flags are flown at half-mast at Trades Hall. There is a big wall hanging now in Trades Hall in Brisbane, celebrating Emma on her march, with a line of women behind her, facing the policemen and the police horse with the hatpin.