

Emily Berth Leitch

1873-1957

This biographical portrait of Emily Berth Leitch (1873-1957) was prepared by the Victorian Women Graduates' Association in 1961. The VWGA was founded in 1920, later changing its name to Australian Federation of University Women Victoria and in 2011 to Graduate Women Victoria.

In 1958, through a most generous provision in the will of the late Lady Leitch, tertiary education for women in Victoria received a legacy which cannot fail to have widespread effects. One part of the legacy has enabled the University Women's College of the University of Melbourne to build a beautiful assembly hall, known as Leitch Hall, which will become an integral part of the memories of every girl who attends the College. The greater part of the gift, however, was left to the Victorian Women Graduates' Association for the provision of scholarships for women graduates. It is typical of the wisdom of the testator that the gift was made unconditionally, so leaving the Trustees of the Scholarship Fund free to set conditions from time to time as special needs arise.

The girl who through her foresight was in later life to influence the lives of so many other girls, was born in 1873 as Emily Bertha Main. She was unusually fortunate in that in a period which set little store by the education of women (1870's), her father held advanced views on this subject. There was therefore no difficulty about taking up a university course and in 1895 she graduated MB. BA, among the first ten women graduates from the Medical School of the University of Melbourne.

There followed a short period in general practice, but her main energies were devoted to setting up what was later to be the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital for Women, starting this venture in a small church hall which was gradually equipped and staffed as the result of a public appeal for one shilling per head from the population of Victoria. She remained closely associated with this hospital throughout her life. She married in 1898, Mr (later Sir) Walter Leitch, and from 1928 to 1933 they spent five years in London where he was Agent General for Victoria.

One of Lady Leitch's friends has stated that 'she had a great interest in all helpful causes', and this is reflected in the organisations for which she untiringly undertook committee work. She was for many years on the Board of Management of the Women's Hospital in Melbourne, and was one-time President of the Victoria League. Through the League she became Chairman of its Bush Library; her championship of education for women and her strong sense of humour led to her recounting with great joy the receipt of a letter from an outback station owner who requested 'a parcel of good literature for myself and some suitable reading matter for my women folk'.

Although she occupied the chair on a number of committees, among which was the District Nursing Committee, Lady Leitch was never content to be a chairman only in name; she was an active working member of any committee with which she was connected. As chairman,

her ability to size up people and their capabilities enabled her to call forth these abilities and to put them to work in the most useful fields. In speaking of her as an excellent committee woman, however, her friends never fail to mention also her sweetness and understanding of personal problems.

Lady Leitch's more personal interests were in music and the collection of a fine library with emphasis on classics, travel and biography. She was always a great lover of youth, and immensely enjoyed association with young people on any project - but her efficiency and sense of duty required also punctuality and devotion from her associates.

It seems that Lady Leitch and her husband made early plans as to the distribution of their possessions. They lived in an extremely simple manner so that these plans could come to fruition. After the death of her husband, Lady Leitch lived alone and with the greatest independence refused any help even during her last illness.

Lady Leitch died in 1957. A woman of small stature but a very great heart and mind, she remained an inspiration for all who knew her. This "portrait" has been prepared so that those young women, who in years to come will benefit from her gift, may also know something of her as a person entirely devoted to the service of her fellow men and women.

The Lady Leitch Scholarship was awarded every year from 1960-1972, then every second year from 1974 to 1998. The Scholarship was awarded again in 1999 and a bursary in memory of Lady Leitch in 2003 and 2007.

GRADUATE WOMEN VICTORIA

A short biography of Emma Leitch is included with her husband's biography in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* < <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/leitch-emily-bertha-7754> >