

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

GRACE EMILY MUNRO

(1879 – 1964)

Country Women's Association Founder

1879	25 March born at Gragin, Warialda, northern NSW
1898	14 July married Hugh Munro of Keera, Bingara
1911	Youngest child died
1914-1918	Lived in Sydney, doing voluntary war work
1922	Organised the meeting that formed the Country Women's Association and was elected first President
1924	Ill health forced her to retire
1935	Awarded the MBE
1938	Member of Advisory Council of New England University College at Armidale, NSW
1964	23 July died in Sydney aged 85 years

Grace Emily Munro was the second of seven daughters of Eliza Frances (McDonald) and George Hollingworth Gordon, a wealthy grazier. Her grandfather, Hugh Gordon, who arrived from Scotland in 1839 and pioneered Strathbogie, Emmaville in northern NSW, was MLA for Tenterfield 1861-89. She was educated by governesses and later at Kambala School in Sydney. She became an accomplished horsewoman and could drive a buggy at a gallop as well as any man! She was also a good shot, an expert needlewoman and a knowledgeable gardener. Tall and thin, Grace had *a forceful, energetic, even dominating and self-centred personality, although she always remained devoted to her family.*

She was only nineteen when she married 36 year old grazier Robert Munro of Keera, Bingara, another large landowner in the area. They had four children. When the youngest child died in 1911, while Grace was absent in Sydney with another child having an emergency appendectomy, she determined to improve the health care for country women and children.

At the outbreak of World War I, Grace was on a ship returning from a world tour. On arrival in Sydney she immediately joined the newly formed Red Cross. She remained in Sydney, living at Bellevue Hill, throughout the War, tirelessly involved in voluntary work. She qualified in first aid, home nursing and hygiene with the St John Ambulance Association, and was appointed a Serving Sister of St John of Jerusalem so that she could assist with the Red Cross reception of the returning wounded. In her own car with a driver, she regularly transported supplies from the Red Cross Centre in George Street to the Holsworthy Army Camp near Liverpool. She was also served as honorary organizing secretary of the Australian Army Medical Corps' Comforts Fund.

During the paralyzing General Strike of 1917, which involved over 77 000 workers in NSW alone, the Government enlisted help from the Farmers' and Settlers' Association and the Primary Producers' Union to bring men to Sydney to work on the wharves to load supplies for the war front. Grace ran the temporary post office at the Sydney Showground where the country volunteers were billeted.

After the war she obtained special permission from London to lecture in First Aid and gave classes at Keera and other centres. She also became a member of the Bingara Hospital Board in 1925, the first woman to be appointed to a hospital board in country NSW.

Grace was indefatigable in helping to organize and widely publicise the conference which formally established the Country Women's Association of New South Wales. The idea of a Bushwomen's Conference was initiated by journalist Florence Gordon who wrote a series of challenging articles about conditions for women in the bush in the Home Page of the Stock and Station Journal. She received such overwhelming response from country women that, despite ridicule from the male-dominated community, a committee was formed and a three day conference planned during the 1922 Royal Easter Show in Sydney. A very nervous committee waited anxiously to see if anyone would turn up. They did, of course, in droves, and the conference, with Grace as chairman, was wildly successful.

Grace was elected founding President and insisted that the new organization be called the Country Women's Association. She remained equally as adamant when, at the age of 80, her speech defending the notion that the President must live on the land swayed the entire CWA Assembly. Today there are 22 rules in the CWA Constitution; 19 of them are Grace's initial ideas.

Determinedly non-sectarian and non-political, the Association took its inspiration from the Women's Institutes established in Canada and Britain in the 1890s and early 1900s. Its aims were to improve living conditions and provide amenities and health care facilities for women and children in rural areas.

The women rushed back to their country towns to form branches (the first one was formed in Crookwell the day after the conference) and the Association spread like wildfire.

Between 1922 and 1924 Grace was frantically busy travelling throughout NSW and Queensland forming branches of the CWA. By the end of 1923 there were 68 branches and 17 Rest Rooms for mothers and children in country towns. Bush Nurses were appointed. She campaigned actively for maternity wards in country hospitals and improved conditions on trains and in railway refreshment rooms for women and children, badgering and cajoling Government Ministers to consider women in all forms of government planning. She continually stressed the importance of country women taking up handicrafts.

Grace established the first CWA Rest Room in Bingara in 1924 and, in the following year, helped found the first Baby Health Centre in the country, in Moree. She was also instrumental in setting up, in the Sydney suburb of Dee Why in 1924, the Association's first Holiday Home where mothers and their children could escape to the coast for a change from the often poor living conditions and harsh inland climate, and the never-ending workload. It was called Keera House, in Grace's honour (it was moved to Manly in 1955).

Ill health forced Grace to retire at the end of 1924 by which time 120 branches had been formed with total membership of over 4500 and 21 Rest Rooms had been financed and fitted out. However, she remained dedicated to the CWA for the rest of her life, serving on many committees, lobbying, and raising large sums of money for such causes as Rest Centres and Holiday Homes, the Australian Inland Mission's Appeal, the Red Cross and St John Ambulance. She was awarded an MBE in 1935.

She was a member of the Advisory Council of New England University College at Armidale from 1938.

After her eldest son's marriage in 1936, Grace did not live at Keera, but developed a series of properties at Scone and Bundarra and houses in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, as well as continuing to indulge her love of travel. She died on 23 July 1964 aged 85 years, after suffering from severe curvature of the spine. With her independent wealth she was able to live mostly separately from her husband, also an energetic and public figure. He remained amusedly tolerant and proud of her activities. When Grace died she had seen the CWA spread throughout all states of Australia and into Papua New Guinea, with branches in cities as well as country districts. Grace was cremated and her ashes were scattered over Keera. *The CWA is her monument.*

Sources

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*Held in JSNWL

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