Kate Edger
Biography

On 11 July 1877 Kate Edger (Owen) graduated with a BA in Latin and Mathematics from the University of New Zealand. She became the first woman in New Zealand to gain a university degree and the first woman in the British Empire to earn a BA.

Kate and her three sisters received most of their early education from their father, Reverend Samuel Edger. With no secondary school for girls in Auckland, he obtained permission from the headmaster of Auckland College and Grammar School for Kate to study with the top class of boys.

When she applied for a scholarship to all for a University Scholarship, Kate gave her age and qualifications, but not her gender. Acceptance of her application in effect allowed her to proceed to study towards her degree.

After her graduation she became first assistant at Otago Girls' High School and also began study at Canterbury College for her MA. At 26 Edger was appointed foundation headmistress of Nelson College for Girls. She worked hard to establish a school which could provide a first-class education for girls.

In 1890 Kate married William Evans, a Congregationalist minister. In 1891 the couple moved to Wellington, where William did unpaid educational and charitable work in the Fawcett movement. Kate became the breadwinner, running a private school from the family home in Mount Victoria. She taught girls at secondary level in the mornings and coached adult pupils in the evenings.

She supported women's suffrage and until the early 1920s was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She was also heavily involved in the New Zealand Society to the Protection of Women and Children.

Kate was not strongly feminist in outlook. In 1903 she wrote an article, 'The first girl graduate', which asked and answered the question of whether the higher education of women had justified itself. 'It is too soon yet for a complete answer to be given to this question, but thousands of university women are proving by their lives that it has not hindered them in their womanly, the truest sphere of woman's work.'

Adapted from the ENZBI biography by Peg Hughes

* Read the full entry in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography

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