

Kate Edger

Biography

MCH, 2020o

On 11 July 1877 Kate Edger (Evans) 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 permission to sit 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 Christchurch 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 1893 the couple moved to Wellington, where William did unpaid adult educational and charitable work for the Forward movement. Kate became the bread-winner, 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 1930s was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. She was also heavily involved in the New Zealand Society for the Protection of Women and Children.

Kate was not strongly feminist in outlook. In 1923 she wrote an article, 'The first girl graduates', 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 unfitted them for home-making, the noblest sphere of women's work.'

Adapted from the DNZB biography by Beryl Hughes

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

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'Kate Edger', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/people/kate-edger>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 13-Jul-2020

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p.86



updated
3rd edition volume (?)