Following our recent article on May Cox, after which it is proposed that the redrawn electorate of Corangamite be named, there have been calls for more information on this remarkable person. (Note that May has in the accompanying photos.) Deb Campbell, who has written the previous article has done some more research and discovered much more about May. Deb writes:

Before May Cox began her career as a pupil teacher at Albert Park State School at 16, and at 27 was appointed the Education Department’s Organiser of Swimming, May was a swimming instructor such as Henry Evans. She had trained as swimming instructors such as Frank Beaurepaire. She was the Victorian Education Department’s Organiser of Swimming and Physical Education, and worked for the department for a number of years, eventually achieving the rank of Superintendent of Schools. She was appointed to the position in 1914, making her one of the first women teachers in the head of the Victorian Education Department. Very familiar throughout the State in her time as the best-known advocate and instructor of swimming for both boys and girls, she was the executive secretary of the Victorian State School’s Patriotic League (VSSPL). She was the school’s patriotic activities were mobilised the state’s two thousand technical, effective school networks, had a high profile and had already worked with military personnel who would now oversee the patriotic programs.

The VSSPL, through Cox and her staff, supported the mobilisation of young people. After the war ended in 1918, the work increased without any additional salary. During World War II, Cox worked with colleagues and eventually achieved the rank of Superintendent of Schools Patriotic League (VSSPL), which raised the enormous sum of £422,470 (about £30M in today’s currency) to aid soldiers and returned service people.

Cox and her staff supported the committee, chaired by the minister and the head of Education, Frank Tate. The committee was a second statewide promotional, management and organising role for Cox and involved work at which she excelled. She had developed effective school networks, had a high community profile and had already worked with military personnel who would now oversee the patriotic programs. The VSSPL, through Cox and her staff, mobilised the state’s two thousand technical, higher elementary and state schools to work for the war effort. During the war, as well as the money raised, around forty thousand ‘comfort’ articles, including 55,000 (!) knitted socks, were provided by the Department to children and teachers. After the war ended in November 1918, substantial funds were left after the war, and Cox continued as the executive secretary (being paid an additional honorarium of £50 per annum, Whoppeol).

The committee eventually invested its proceeds of almost £100,000 to provide further benefits to returned soldiers. Significant, one of its first ventures was ‘May—her equal, for May receives regular attention today: the Villers-Bretonneux School in France, rebuilt with Victorian contributions. ’The days of the Victorian soldier killed there. Sir Frank Tate laid its foundation stone in 1935 and was awarded the Legion of Honour on 1977 for his World War II services to France.

So there we go. Tate got a knighthood and a French ‘honour and May — we got equal pay — but not back pay! May retired in 1938 and immediately married. Many women in the public sector did the same if they married while working, they were sacked.

May Cox was a woman of substance, style and flair. She was an innovator, a skilled organiser, a teacher and a journalist. She was a woman who inspired many — and saved a lot of lives: who better to have as the namesake of our electorate by the sea? For much more on Miss May Cox see: http://www.victorianaestatsa.info/leaders/tst/tst/ of014_Towns/pd11/Deborah_Townsh.

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