

Celebrating the Centenary of Ada Emily Evans

By Claire Palmer

On 12 May 2021, the Women Barristers' Forum held a special event at Verandah Bar to celebrate the centenary of Ada Emily Evans becoming the first woman barrister to be admitted to the New South Wales Bar. In a magnificent speech, the Honourable Patricia Bergin SC brought to life Ada's triumphs and challenges. Her Honour reminded the women and men gathered at Verandah Bar how fortunate we are to be the recipients of Ada's legacy.

Ada Evans was the first woman to complete a law degree in Australia. In 1899, Ada Evans applied for entry to Sydney University Law School during the overseas absence of the Dean, Professor Pitt Corbett. The Acting Dean, Professor Jethro Brown, admitted her. On his return, Professor Corbett infamously exclaimed: 'Who is this woman?' As recounted by Bek McPaul:

*'There followed a series of doors slamming, chairs banging on floors and bells ringing. Professor Pitt Corbett summoned Miss Evans to his presence and attempted to dissuade her from continuing her course, pointing out in his own crisp manner that she did not have the physique [for law] and suggesting Medicine as much more suitable.'*¹

Ada Evans persisted in her studies and graduated from the University of Sydney on 19 April 1902. Yet despite having earned her degree, Ada Evans was not eligible to practise because a woman was not

considered to be a 'person' for the purposes of the *Legal Practitioners Act 1898* (NSW). She campaigned for her admission from 1902 until 1918, when the *Women's Legal Status Act 1918* (NSW) was finally passed. Ada Evans served the requisite two years as a student-at-law and, on 12 May 1921, became the first woman to be admitted to the New South Wales Bar.

Ultimately, Ada Evans did not practise as a barrister. She considered that too much time had passed since her graduation. However, Ada Evans' contribution is encapsulated in a letter written to her by Professor Brown, who admitted her to law school in Professor Corbett's absence. Professor Brown had encouraged Ada Evans as follows:

*'If you cannot reap all the reward of your toil, the greater glory may be yours of sowing that others may reap – the glory of the pioneer.'*²

With this sentiment in mind, it was a privilege to come together precisely 100 years after Ada's admission to celebrate her courage, aspiration, and clarity of vision as to the rightful place of women in the law. **BN**

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bek McPaul (1948), 'A Woman Pioneer', *Australian Law Journal*, Vol. 22, 1, 2.
- 2 Extract of Michael Pelly and Caroline Pierce (2016), *Defending the Rights of All: A History of the Law Society of NSW*, Law Society of NSW, Sydney as reprinted at 'Ada Evans: Biography', available at: <https://first100years.com.au/adaevans/> (accessed 17 July 2021).

