

Australian Dictionary of Biography

Thompson, Matilda Louise (1871–1959)

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Matilda Louise Thompson (1871-1959), businesswoman and philanthropist, was born on 28 April 1871 at Ballarat, Victoria, fifth child of English-born John Clennell, engine driver, and his Scottish wife Matilda, née McIntosh. Having migrated to Melbourne in the early 1850s, her parents moved to Ballarat in 1870 where they quickly became respected members of the Jubilee Wesleyan Church. Both at home and at Sunday School, Tilly was taught to be self-sufficient and helpful: this philosophy was to remain with her.

Tilly left Wendouree State School aged 13 and commenced work at a local drapery store. A woman of 'boundless and terrifying energy', in 1905 she was offered the post of principal sales representative with E. Lucas & Co. Pty Ltd, a firm which designed and manufactured women's clothing. After obtaining a driver's licence and a motor car, she became a 'travelling sales lady'. Her task was to display new fashion designs and to take orders throughout southern Australia. She then moved into a senior managerial position at Lucas's, taking charge of production and a staff of 250 women. In 1913-14 she visited Europe to evaluate new machinery and fashion trends.

World War I brought Tilly greater public prominence. She and the 'Lucas Girls' threw themselves into charitable works, collecting thousands of pounds for patriotic funds. Tilly decided that more should be done. She encouraged the Lucas staff and numerous other charitable bodies to build a suitable memorial to the local volunteers: it took the form of Ballarat's Avenue of Honour (3912 trees) and the Arch of Victory which was unveiled by the Prince of Wales in June 1920.

On 6 August 1914 at Ballarat Tilly had married with Methodist forms William Daniel Thompson, a wealthy mining speculator and a widower with six children. When he died in 1927 she retired and spent five years in Europe. Returning to Ballarat in 1933, she launched immediately into other projects with typical zest. On the shore of Lake Wendouree she built a large house, Sunways, which became a temporary refuge for any ex-serviceman who was down on his luck. Over two decades hundreds of men and women enjoyed Mrs Thompson's assistance: she gave financial support to numerous local charities, ran women's self-help, callisthenics and dietary classes, and travelled throughout Victoria speaking to women's groups.

A vibrant woman who never lost her ability to promote unconventional ideas, she was awarded the gold medal of the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia in 1939 and appointed M.B.E. in 1941. Still upright, alert and bright-eyed in old age, she died at Ballarat on 7 April 1959 and was buried in the old cemetery. Her estate was valued for probate at £12,559.

Select Bibliography

- M. White, *The Golden Thread* (1963?)
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Citation details

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