Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE1155

Thompson, Matilda Louise

(1871 - 1959)

Born	18710428, Ballarat Victoria Australia
Died	19590407, Ballarat Victoria Australia
Occupation	Businesswoman, Philanthropist

Summary

Matilda Thompson was an active member of the Ballarat community. She raised a substantial sum of money for Ballarat's Avenue of Honour during the First World War and opened her home, *Sunways*, as a refuge for ex-servicemen.

Details

Born 1871 and raised in Ballarat, Matilda was the fifth child of John Clennell (an English-born engine driver) and Matilda McIntosh (Scottish-born). Though she left school aged 13, her work with E. Lucas & Co. (a women's clothing company) from 1905 reportedly led her to become Australia's first female commercial traveller, and after a trip abroad as a buyer for the company, she returned to take charge of its 500 female staff. In 1914 she married William Daniel Thompson, a wealthy mining speculator and widower with six children.

Matilda was known for her patriotism. Between 1917 and 1919, she and the "Lucas Girls" raised money for Ballarat's Avenue of Honour (3912 trees along a 14 mile avenue) and subsequently for its Arch of Victory, reputedly costing £10,600 in total. Later Matilda taught women's health and exercise classes, travelling throughout Victoria to speak to women's groups, and used profits from her classes to erect a roll of honour at Ballarat, recording the names of those servicemen honoured in the Avenue. Both during and after the war she arranged welcome home ceremonies for returned soldiers and eventually opened her home "Sunways", on the shores of Lake Wendouree, as a refuge house for struggling ex-servicemen.

Matilda's patriotic efforts were recognised in 1939 when she received the gold medal of the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia; and again in 1941 when she was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.).

Widowed in 1927, Matilda died in 1959 and was buried at Ballarat. The *Ballarat Courier* lamented, "it will be a long time before another personality of her ability and generosity appears on the Ballarat scene, and the special place which she made for herself in the community is unlikely again to be filled."

"Sunways" now operates as an aged care facility under the patronage of UnitingCare (The Uniting Church of Australia).

Published resources

Resource Section
Thompson, Matilda Louise (1871-1959), Mansfield, Peter, 2006,
http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120232b.htm

Thesis
In Her Gift: Activism and Altruism in Australian Women's Philanthropy, 1880-2005, Lemon, Barbara, 2008

Site Exhibition
Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html

In Her Gift: Women Philanthropists in Australian History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2009,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/wiph/home.html

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

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