

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE25073012

Short, Katherine Hilda Tapley

(1870 - 1947)

Born	18700410, Armley Yorkshire England
Died	19470723, Hawthorn Victoria Australia
Occupation	Community activist, Teacher

Summary

Known as ‘Tapley’, Katherine Hilda Tapley Short, was an engaging and often provocative pioneering community leader in the 1920s and 1930s. Employed by the Young Women’s Christian Association she supported working women in practical ways including educational and social programs, advanced women’s sport, advocated women’s political representation and broadened the YWCA’s membership restrictions. She influenced business and industrial houses to support athletics and team sports for thousands of working women and girls through the Victorian Interhouse Girls Sporting Association. Her networking and tireless determination increased the number of sporting venues at Albert Park for women’s basketball, hockey and cricket. A skilled organiser, Tapley was appointed the pioneering General Secretary of YWCA Newcastle (1922–23) and YWCA Canberra (1929–36) and ensured their successful futures.

Details

Tapley's parents were the Reverend Thomas Tapley Short and Mary Lawry Sturges. She emigrated with her family to Melbourne in 1892 and worked as an unpaid curate for her father when he was the Anglican Vicar of St Margaret's Mildura and St Paul's Ballarat East. She also worked as a teacher, sports mistress and resident mistress in three independent girls' schools (Fairlight, Toorak College and Clyde).

She was first employed by the YWCA Melbourne as the Assistant General Secretary in 1921, travelling to different locations to establish programs to support young working women. In Kyabram and Maroopna, fruit-growing areas in Victoria which provided seasonal work for girls, she worked with cannery owners and the local community to provide safer accommodation and organise social, educational and sporting activities. After Tapley's speech to a meeting of 250 'business' girls in Newcastle, she was appointed their first General Secretary and she introduced programs such as a Saturday morning children's play group for young married women, bushwalking, nature study and support for the Workers Educational Association. On her return to Melbourne in 1923, she represented the YWCA at meetings with the Education Department and the National Council of Women Victoria's Education Committee, advocating increased opportunities for girls' education and training and to raise the school leaving age to 15 years.

At the first YWCA Australia national conference in 1926, Tapley, as an inaugural National Board member, gave an inspirational speech 'Woman's Place in Public Life' which began: 'No democracy may leave one sex to legislate for the other'. As the first President of the Victorian Interhouse Girls Sporting Association, she was also instrumental in ensuring that businesses such as Myer Emporium and Kodak sponsored teams in athletics (including skipping races, flag relays, sack races, ball games and flat races). There were also swimming, basketball, baseball and hockey competitions. Her negotiations with business and community leaders resulted in increased land being made available at Albert Park for girls' and women's sport.

In 1929 Tapley was appointed the first General Secretary for YWCA Canberra, a challenging role as many young women were employed in the public service and in businesses but the city had not yet developed social programs or transport infrastructure. Under Tapley's leadership, the membership was not restricted to the traditional Protestant base and she also encouraged girls' leadership. The club rooms became the main youth centre in Canberra for both young men and women with activities such as team games, psychology classes, arts and crafts, and hiking activities (which later developed into bushwalking and ski clubs). In 1931, YWCA Canberra's new building was funded by YWCA clubs fundraising across Australia, but as the Great Depression hit, Tapley had to rely on sourcing donations of second-hand equipment and furniture. Despite these difficulties, she organised the first national YWCA conference in Canberra in 1932 and other activities such as sports and evening lectures increased.

Returning to Melbourne in 1936, Tapley held the position of Associate General Secretary until 1938, when at the invitation of the Anglican Bishop of Goulburn, she took on various social work projects to support girls. She retired in 1940 and lived with a married sister in Hawthorn until her death in 1947.

Published resources

Book

The Dauntless Bunch : The Story of the YWCA in Australia, Dunn, Margaret, 1991

A Work in Progress: A History of the YWCA of Canberra 1929-2009, Hutchison, Mary and Andrew, Merrindahl, 2009

Y.W.C.A. 1882-1982 : Melbourne pictorial history, Durrant, Leoni, 1982

Article

Woman's Place in Public Life, Short, K. Hilda Tapley, 14 September 1926

When the Girls Wake Up: What a Wonderful World This Will Be, Short, K. Hilda Tapley, 20 April 1927, p. 6

Miss Tapley Short: Farewell by Canberra Friends, 31 January 1936

Miss Tapley Short: Tributes from the YWCA, 3 December 1937

Archival resources

University of Melbourne Archives

[Records of the YWCA of Australia](#)

Author Details

Deborah Towns OAM

