

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

MATILDA ANN ASTON

(1873-1947)

Blind writer and teacher

1873	Born 11 December in Carisbrook, Victoria; daughter of Edward and Ann Aston
1880	Became totally blind
1882	Continued her education at the Victorian Asylum and the School for the Blind
1889	Studied for 1 year at University of Melbourne in Arts Faculty
1894	Established the Victorian Association for Blind Writers – later the Victorian Braille Library
1901-1908	Her first 3 books were published
1913	Undertook a course of teacher training and become Head of the Education Department's School for the Blind
1925	Retired from teaching
1924-1940	More of her writings were published
1935	Received a Commonwealth Grant for her writing
1947	Died 1 November in Windsor, Victoria

Matilda Aston, known as Tilly, was the youngest of eight children. She was born with impaired vision, and her sight deteriorated progressively until she was completely blind at the age of seven. She barely had time to learn to read and write.

She learnt to read in Braille and was educated to Matriculation level at the Victorian Asylum and the School for the Blind. Further studies in the University of Melbourne's Arts Faculty were hampered because there were virtually no textbooks in Braille, and she gave up her studies after one year. She became a music teacher and a writer, having her first book *Maiden Verses* published in 1901.

In 1894 she enlisted the help of friends to found the Victorian Association of Braille Writers, which later become the Victorian Braille Library. She also set up the Association for the Advancement of the Blind, with herself as Secretary.

In 1913, aged forty, she undertook a course of teacher training to become Head of the Education Department's School for the Blind. The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind had many misgivings about 'the blind teaching the blind', but Tilly filled her post competently and encouraged her pupils until ill-health forced her to retire in 1925.

At an early age her parents took every opportunity to draw her attention to the beauty of nature, endowing her with vivid memories which inspired her as a writer. Writing in Braille and typing the manuscripts herself, Tilly published works between 1901 and 1946. For many years she was Editor of and chief contributor to *A Book of Opals*, a

Braille magazine for Chinese mission schools. She received a Commonwealth grant for her writings in 1935 and was twice awarded the King's Medal for Distinguished Citizenship.

Tremendous willpower and the urge to live a useful, independent life despite her handicap were Tilly's chief characteristics. She died of cancer on 1 November 1947 and was buried in St Kilda cemetery.

Published Works.

Maiden Verses (1901)

The Woolinappers or Some tales from the by-laws of Methodism (1905)

The Straight Goer (serialized in the *Spectator* from 1908)

Singable Songs (1924)

Songs of Light (1935)

Gold from Old Diggings (serialized in the *Bendigo Advertiser* from August 1937)

Old Timer (1938)

The Inner Garden (1940)

Memoirs of Tilly Aston (1946)

Sources

Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol 7 1891-1939

Elder, Bruce Ed. *The A to Z of Who is Who in Australia's history* Child and Associates 1987

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