

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person

**Entry ID:** AWE2062

## Aston, Matilda Ann

(1873 - 1947)

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**Born** 11 December, 1873, Carisbrook Victoria Australia

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**Died** 1 November, 1947, Windsor Victoria Australia

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**Occupation** Disability rights activist, Teacher, Writer

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### Summary

Matilda Ann Aston (December 11, 1873 – November, 1947), better known as Tilly Aston, was a blind Australian writer and teacher. She founded the *Victorian Association of Braille Writers* (which became the *Victorian Braille Library*) and then went on to establish the *Association for the Advancement of the Blind*, assuming the post of secretary.

Tilly's energy was unbounded and her achievements (along with those of her co-workers) to promote the human rights of vision impaired people were plentiful. They include:

- Successfully lobbying for the world's first free post system for braille (and later talking) books.

- Gaining free public transport for blind people.

- Achieving the right to vote for blind people.

- Lobbying for the repeal of the bounty system which meant blind people had to pay hefty levies before they could travel interstate

- Gaining Government approval for a pension for all legally blind people.

## Details

Matilda (Tilly) Ann Aston was a blind Australian writer and teacher who founded the *Victorian Association of Braille Writers*, and later went on to establish the *Association for the Advancement of the Blind*.

Born in the town of Carisbrook, Victoria in 1873, Tilly was one of eight children. Vision impaired from birth, she had lost most of her sight by the age of seven. A chance meeting with Thomas James, an itinerant blind missionary changed her life; he introduced her to the Braille method of reading. She was then persuaded to travel to Melbourne to further her education. After successfully matriculating in 1888, Tilly became the first blind Australian to go to a university. Sadly, she was unable to complete her Arts Degree at the University of Melbourne due to the lack of braille text books. She was forced to discontinue her studies in the middle of her second year.

In 1894, with the assistance of the *Australian Natives Association*, Tilly established the *Victorian Association of Braille Writers*. This organisation would eventually become the *Victorian Braille Library*. In 1895, she established the *Association for the Advancement of the Blind* to fight for greater independence, social change and new laws for blind people. They quickly won voting rights for blind people; free postage for Braille material (in 1899 – a world first); and transport concessions for the blind.

In 1913, aged forty, Tilly undertook a course of teacher training to become head of the Victorian Education Department's School for the Blind. The *Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind* had some misgivings about the appointment, given her disability, but she proved to be a competent educator and administrator, working for the department until ill-health forced her to retire in 1925

As well as being an energetic activist and inspirational teacher, Tilly Aston was a prolific writer. Between 1901 and 1940 she published eight volumes of verse. Her self-penned memoirs *The Memoirs of Tilly Aston : Australia's blind poet, author and philanthropist* were published in 1946. She corresponded with people around the world in Esperanto, and was editor and chief contributor to *A Book of Opals*, a Braille magazine for Chinese mission schools, for many years.

Tilly's lifetime of achievements has been recognised in a number of ways. She twice received the King's Medal for distinguished citizens service. A cairn in her honour was erected by the school children of Carisbrook and the Midlands Historical Society. The Federal electorate Division of Aston in Melbourne's eastern suburbs is named after her, as is a species of rose. There is also a sculpture in her honour in King's Domain, in Melbourne, Victoria. The Tilly Aston Bell rings, but only after one runs one's hands all the way round the Braille inscription that the sculpture carries.

Tilly Aston died from cancer on November 1 1947. Her ability to live a useful, independent life despite her disability was inspirational.

## Events

### **2001 - 2001**

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

## Published resources

### Book

No Sight -Great Vision: A Centenary History of the Association for the Blind, Wilson, J.W., 1996

Lighthouse on the Boulevard: A History of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) 1866-2004, Buckrich, Judith R., 2004

Memoirs of Tilly Aston : Australia's blind poet author and philanthropist., Aston, Tilly, 1946

The inner garden, Aston, Tilly, 1940

Maiden verses, Aston, Tilly, 1901

Old timers : sketches and word pictures of the old pioneers, Aston, Tilly, 1938

Singable Songs, Aston, Tilly, 1924

Songs of Light, Aston, Tilly, 1935

The woolinappers : or, some tales from the by-ways of Methodism, Aston, Tilly, 1905

### Resource Section

Aston, Matilda Ann (1873-1947), Green, O. S., 2006,  
<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070123b.htm>

With Love to My Niece, Aston, Tilly, 2005,  
<http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/%5Cinfo.aspx?page=647>

### Resource

Our History, Vision Australia, 2005,  
<http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/info.aspx?page=645>

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

### Site Exhibition

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

## Archival resources

### Vision Australia

[Vision Australia's Heritage Collection](#)

### National Library of Australia, Pictures Collection

[Portrait of Tilly Aston \[picture\]](#)

### National Library of Australia

[\[Biographical cuttings on Matilda Ann Aston. "Australia's blind poet, author and philanthropist". containing one or more cuttings from newspapers or journals\]](#)

### Author Details

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