

Classic Poetry Series

Matilda Ann Aston
- poems -

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Matilda Ann Aston(11 December 1873 - 1 November 1947)

Matilda Ann Aston, better known as Tilly 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, with herself as secretary. She is remembered for her achievements in promoting the rights of vision impaired people.

Life

Tilly was born in the town of Carisbrook, Victoria in 1873, the youngest of eight children born to Edward Aston, bootmaker, and his wife, Ann. Vision impaired from birth, she was totally blind by the age of 7. Her father died in 1881. Six months later, through a chance meeting, she met Thomas James, a miner who had lost his sight in an industrial accident and who had become an itinerant blind missionary. He taught her to read braille and soon after, the Rev. W. Moss, who visited Carisbrook with the choir of the Victorian Asylum and School for the Blind, persuaded her to attend the school in St. Kilda, Melbourne, to further her education. She enrolled as a boarder on 29 June 1882. After successfully matriculating at the age of 16, Tilly became the first blind Australian to go to a university, enrolling for an Arts Degree from University of Melbourne. However, due to the lack of braille text books and "nervous prostration", she was forced to discontinue her studies in the middle of her second year. While convalescent, she tried to earn her living as a music-teacher, and realised the plight of blind people.

After leaving school, she lived with her mother and a brother in Melbourne until about 1913, when her mother died and her brother married. She then moved to a house of her own in Windsor, where she had a house-keeper-companion. She died there of cancer on 1 November 1947.

The Federal electorate Division of Aston in Melbourne's eastern suburbs and a street in the Canberra suburb Cook are named in her honour. A cairn was erected in her honour, a year after her death, by Carsbrook School and the Midlands Historical Society, and there is a sculpture in her honour in King's Domain, Melbourne.

Career

With the assistance of friends and the Australian Natives Association, Aston established the Victorian Association of Braille Writers in 1894. This organisation would eventually become the Victorian Braille Library. In 1895 a meeting called by Tilly Aston founded the Association for the Advancement of the Blind (now Vision Australia) 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 for Australia); and transport concessions for the blind.

In 1913 Tilly Aston did teaching training and become head of the Victorian Education Department's School for the Blind, the first blind woman to do so. Her appointment was not without criticism from staff and officials of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind because of her disability and she was required to "sever her connexion with the blind societies she had helped to found". She proved a competent educator and administrator, but her school years were not happy ones. She retired in 1925, after suffering a slight stroke, and received a small allowance in lieu of superannuation.

Writing career

Aston was also a prolific writer, particularly of poetry and prose sketches, though her writing was often interrupted by her teaching and other activities. In 1904, she won the Prahran City Council's competition for an original story. The Woolinappers, or Some Tales from the By-ways of Methodism was published in 1905, and several books followed after that. Her writings were also serialised in Victorian newspapers and, for 12 years, she edited and contributed to a braille magazine for Chinese mission schools, A Book of Opals.

She had 8 volumes of verse published in Melbourne between 1901 and 1940, corresponded around the world using the Esperanto language, and wrote her memoirs which were published in 1946. She believed her book of verse, The Inner Garden, contained her best work.

When Betty Makes A Garden

When Betty makes a garden,
With shrubs and bushes planned,
I'd like to be upon the spot,
And lend a helping hand –

For when the Spring and Summer
Call forth the blossoms there,
I know in Betty's garden
I'd surely have a share
She'd give me showery wattle,
As gold as dawning day,
And Crimson Rambler roses warm,
And cool and snowy May;

Long chains of bright Laburnum,
And butter-coloured Broom,
And thus would Betty's garden
Make sunshine in my room.

If I were Betty's neighbour,
And full her garden grown,
I'd sniff the breathing odours rich
In through my window blown,
From Loquat flower and Almond,
And Oleander tall,
From Laurel and from Lilac,
The dearest of them all.

Yes, straight from Betty's garden
She'd bring me Lilac flower,
In mauve, like stately lady
In old-time lady's bower;
And wreaths of Honeysuckle
She'd pilfer from the bee,
And Jasmine from the trellis,
To share them all with me.

When Betty makes a garden
For shrubs and bushes planned,

I'd like to be Godmother there,
And name the lovely band-
Thus I in Betty's garden
Would have a rightful share,
And in my quiet chamber
I'd breathe its incense rare.

Matilda Ann Aston