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# MARY THOMPSON

40 YEARS' PIONEERING SERVICE TO INDIA



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The Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein.

## Mary Thompson (1860-1936)

After receiving ‘the call’ at the 1891 Inter-Colonial Conference, Mary made a 40-year commitment to Zenana Mission – serving women living in Harda and Dhona, 419 miles north-east of the India capital.

Australian-born Mary Thompson was 30 when she caught the steamer *Massilia* to Bombay to become Australia’s first Churches of Christ missionary. Located in the Central Provinces of India, the province of Harda was and is still accessible by train via the Great Indian Peninsula Railway. Acting as the mission ‘hub’ for Churches of Christ, Harda offered a small church serving Europeans and Eurasians. The province had a population of 15,000 when Mary arrived, the people spread among 409 villages situated within a 10-mile radius.

To Mary’s great surprise, however, the small church congregation had only 35 members. For the locals, expulsion from their family following conversion was a very real threat, but despite this obstacle the town seeded much gospel work. In 1893, the first Bible training school for ministers opened in Harda for male students.

With India’s deeply segregated society, women were rarely permitted to enter places that men inhabited, but they retained freedom to participate in ‘zenana’ activities carried out in ‘private areas of houses for women’. Therefore, Mary’s work was referred to as ‘Zenana Mission’ and through her four decades of service, Mary’s work came to emulate and inform the idea of successful mission work.

Mary’s female converts were known as ‘Bible women’ in town, and they worked with Mary to bridge the vast cultural differences between English missionaries and the villagers. Observing her work during a three month stay in 1919-20, Bert Wilson, mission secretary for the Foreign Christian Mission Society reflected:

*“Having been a teacher in Australia Mary Thompson began her career in India in the school room. But in addition to that work, she felt that the mothers in the homes must be taught also. So, she began a systematic program of visiting in the homes of the people. Many of the women were not friendly at first, especially the Mohammedan women. They were prejudiced, and their husbands did not want their wives to learn from foreign women. But gradually the simple life of faith opened up the doors and the hearts of the Harda women.”*

During Mary’s leadership of the girls’ school in Harda, which had the largest enrolment of non-Christian girls in the province, Mary facilitated the opening of girls’ schools, establishing and supporting women’s hospitals, and encouraged the building of women’s wards in hospitals. Mary came to be known to the Indian community as ‘Beloved Mary’ and to Australians as ‘Our Pioneering Missionary’. Well known in Australia, Mary’s inbound and outbound travel, speaking engagements and social activities were regularly reported in many Australian newspapers, including *The West Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and syndicated regional papers. In the last five years of her mission, Mary continued alone in her work after the United Society pulled out of India, and she was sustained by donations and prayers from her Australian network.

Mary returned to Australia on furlough several times between 1891 to 1934, her last visit triggered by ill health. Returning to her hometown of Melbourne to rest, Mary Thompson died in March 1936.

In recognition of her contribution in India, the 'Mary Thompson Memorial Bungalow' was built, funded by donations from the brotherhood and opened in 1937 as a nurse compound attached to the Ashwood Hospital Compound in Dhond.

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## IMAGES

RMS Massilia (cited as “Fig. 3: The Royal Mail Steamship Massilia as depicted in the bound and printed version of the Massilia Gazette.”

Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg Ship Newspapers and Passenger Life Aboard Transoceanic Steamships in the Late Nineteenth Century

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