

# Australian Dictionary of Biography

## Wood, Thomas (1892–1950)

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Thomas Wood (1892-1950), composer and author, was born on 28 November 1892 at Chorley, Lancashire, England, only child of Thomas Wood, master mariner, and his wife Hannah, née Lee. Tommy later believed that his formal education had been immeasurably enriched by boyhood voyages with his father. Despite congenitally poor vision due to cataracts in both eyes, in 1913 he completed an external bachelor's degree in music through the University of Oxford. That year he entered Christ Church, Oxford, and moved in 1916 to Exeter College with which he was to remain associated. Rejected seven times as unfit for the navy during World War I, he joined a department of the Admiralty in 1917. After graduating from Oxford (B.A., 1918; M.A., 1920), he studied under Sir Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music (D.Mus., 1920).

In 1921 Wood was appointed director of music at Tonbridge School, Kent, where one of his students recalled him as a 'bespectacled, untidy, little man'. Wood returned to Exeter College where he was a lecturer in 1924-27. In both posts he won golden opinions and began to compose choral and orchestral works, some of which subsequently received acclaim. On 2 July 1924 at the parish church, Wormingford, Essex, he had married St Osyth Mahala Eustace-Smith.

Apart from music, the prevailing passions of Wood's life were the British Empire, foreign travel and the sea; his writing is instinct with a fervent Imperial sentiment. He came to Australia in 1930 to conduct examinations for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music and spent some two years travelling across the country. On his return to England, he wrote *Cobbers* (London, 1934), still the most perceptive and captivating characterization of Australia and its people ever written by a visitor. Wood revelled in the company of 'hard boiled citizens' and in the ways of ordinary men and women, but a deep sense of beauty and poetry combined with affectionate humour to produce his memorable descriptions, particularly of regional differences. As a collector of folk songs, he was so impressed by *Waltzing Matilda*—which he thought good enough 'to be the unofficial national anthem of Australia'—that he included its words and music in *Cobbers*.

In May 1936 Wood joined the British Ministry of Information. That year he published an excellent, 'modest but finely wrought', autobiography, *True Thomas*. He visited Canada in the late 1930s and then wrote *Cobbers Campaigning* (London, 1940) in tribute to Australia's part in World War II. In the latter book he wrote: 'There is no turning back. I am now part of Australia, and—for ever—Australia is part of me'. Sponsored by the British government, in 1944 he returned to Australia to give a series of popular talks and broadcasts about wartime Britain. He was a committee-member of the Royal Philharmonic Society and chairman (1949) of the music panel of the British Arts Council. Survived by his wife, Wood died of coronary thrombosis on 19 November 1950 at his home at Bures, Suffolk, and was cremated. His estate was sworn for probate at £118,868.

### Select Bibliography

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