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Merlyn: The Life of Merlyn Baillieu Myer

By Michael Shmith

With research by Dr Stella M Barber

Hardie Grant Books

September 2021

385 pages, hardcover

ISBN: 9781743798096

RRP: \$80.00

Reviewed by Kaye De Petro,

Education and Services Officer, HTAV

Renowned author and journalist, Michael Shmith, with the research assistance of long-time Myer family historian, archivist and curator, Dr Stella Barber, has written this biography of one of Australia's leading philanthropists, Dame Margery Merlyn Baillieu DBE. The monograph itself is more than a biography—it is a substantial hardcover coffee table book filled with sumptuous photos and other primary source images, making it a pleasure to not only read but to pick up and browse while enjoying a cup of tea or coffee.

Shmith's biography of Merlyn is endorsed by historian and writer Ann Blainey (who has written biographies on other Australian luminaries, such as Charles Kingsford Smith and Dame Nellie Melba) and introduced by Sidney Baillieu Myer (known as 'Bails'), the eldest son of Merlyn and Sidney Myer.

Shmith begins with the arrival of the Baillieu family in the mid-nineteenth century after the family had initially settled in England when fleeing the French Revolution of 1789. It seems almost by chance that the patriarch of what was to become the Australian branch of the Baillieu family ended up in Queenscliff, Victoria. James Baillieu had sailed to Australia as a crew member on board the *Priscilla* but, to avoid scarlet fever, quarantine and the purported advances of the drunken ship's master, he jumped ship and, instead of swimming to Sorrento (which was closer), he opted to swim more than three kilometres to Queenscliff.

Thus began what was to become a highly successful life in Australia, with the Baillieu family going on to own what was to become known as the Ozone Hotel. Margery Merlyn Baillieu was born in Queenscliff on 8 January 1900, the third child of Agnes and George Baillieu. She remembers her childhood fondly, growing up in the large, Italianate-style hotel. While she and her three siblings tried to stay out of sight of the guests, when she was about eight years old she did meet one of the guests, a certain Sidney Myer of the Myer department stores (with his first wife, Nance), who was to eventually become her husband.

Merlyn had the usual upbringing of a girl of her class, educated by a

governess with a couple of years at a private school also and then one year of an Arts degree at the University of Melbourne. However, she never completed her Arts degree. When she was sixteen she had met Sidney again, through her mother, and by the age of twenty she was Mrs Sidney Myer.

Sidney and Merlyn had fourteen wonderful years and four children together before Sidney's unexpected death of heart failure in 1934. Almost immediately, Merlyn took up the challenge of running the Myer Emporium, and she was to become known as the 'Mother of the Store'. Under her aegis, the store flourished but she was not content with just the world of commerce.

Merlyn was to become renowned for her philanthropism and charity work. She was involved with many important charities and organisations. The Royal Melbourne Hospital, the Australian and Victorian Red Cross societies, the Victorian Royal Life Saving Society, the now defunct Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital, Deaf Victoria and cancer and heart disease charities were among the many charities to which she gave her time, expertise and money.

Merlyn passed away suddenly in September 1982 after suffering a massive stroke. As the headline in *The Herald* stated: 'The 'Mother of the Store' dies—82'. Merlyn was one of the 'grand ladies' of Melbourne, known for her style, charm and generosity. This biography reflects that—a fitting tribute to a wonderful life.