



Born in Dunedin on 16 December 1870, Hannah Lyall Coombs was the eldest of eight children of George Lyall Coombs, a carpenter, and Eliza, nee Gardiner.

Although registered as Annie Marie Coombs, she preferred to call herself Hannah Lyall Coombs.

She attended Albany Street and George Street schools, and even as a child has “wonderful faith”: school friends with aches and pains would kneel among the shavings in her father’s workshop while she prayed to make the pain go away.

Hannah attended a Salvation Army meeting as a teenager and became an early convert. Although others of her family became ‘soldiers’, only Hannah and her sister Mary are known to have been uniformed Salvationists.

Hannah began training as a salvation Army office just before her 20th birthday, eight months later becoming Fielding’s Corps Officer with the rank of Captain.

In the next 3 years she served in Wellington, Christchurch, Oamaru, and Nelson, and by 1892 commanded one of the five largest Corps in New Zealand. At age 24 however she resigned. There was much antagonism towards the Salvation Army in its early days, and ‘lassie’ officers received verbal and physical abuse. When Hannah found herself unable to eat or sleep properly, she returned home where she sold ladies’ fashions for the next 24 years.

In August 1918 Hannah returned to Salvation Army officership and went on a series of short appointments. The Offenders probation Act of 1920 considerably widened the Army’s work, and

Hannah was appointed Dunedin's Probation Officer in 1921. Three years later she established Samaritan work, visiting courts, prisons and homes to help with family problems.

In 1928 she was appointed Samaritan officer for Christchurch, but returned to Dunedin in 1932 when the Depression was at its height.

The Dunedin Samaritan Centre helped over 4000 people a month. Hannah lived in the old family home in Castle Street with her sister Mary Elliot and Mary's now adult family. Hannah had inherited the house when her father died in 1922 but she passed it on to Mary.

The house was an 'open home' to the many people who arrived in need of food, help or shelter, and Mary's grandchildren were regularly sent around with food parcels, even after Hannah officially retired at the age of 65. She was 'promoted to glory' at Dunedin Hospital on 13 November 1942.

Hannah could never remember a time when she was not conscious of 'an unseen presence'. She had psychic abilities which she later felt interfered with her work, making it difficult to sit opposite someone she 'knew' would die in 3 days. She was known in the family as 'Auntie Dick' because of her support for Richard Seddon, and early champion of the Salvation Army's cause.

She had a rare charm, a keen intellect and outstanding organising ability; in today's world she could have been anything she wanted to be.

Hannah Lyall Coombs' ashes are buried in the family grave in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery.

Prepared by the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand (www.cemeteries.org.nz) from information in *Southern People, a dictionary of Otago Southland Biography*.