

A black and white portrait of a woman, Viola Tait, smiling and looking upwards. She is wearing a large, light-colored hat decorated with flowers and a dark, long-sleeved dress with a lace collar. Her hands are clasped in front of her chest.

VIOLA TAIT

I HAVE A
SONG TO SING

SOME MEMORIES OF GILBERT & SULLIVAN AND J.C. WILLIAMSON LTD



Viola Tait (1911–2002)

Lady Tait AM began working on her memoirs in the late 1960s, but life got in the way—and a very busy and exciting life it was too. The manuscript was filed away in her theatre basket along with photographs, memorabilia and numerous notes on other aspects of the theatre. In 2001, following the launch of her second book, *Dames, Principal Boys ... and All That: A History of Pantomime in Australia*, the manuscript was revived. Unfortunately Viola died before the work could be completed, leaving her editor Elisabeth Kumm and daughter Sally Bell to finish the task, including the preparation of an epilogue and the preliminary selection of images.

... continues inside

Above and front cover:

Lady Tait, 1990s, photo by Angus Forbes (Tait Family Collection). Viola Wilson, 1939, photo by Lucas-Pritchard, New York (David & Annabelle Stone Gilbert & Sullivan Collection)

This book is dedicated to Viola's daughters and grandchildren.

The effort of getting the book published remained out of reach at the time, however, and it was not until some fifteen years later that Elisabeth, through her involvement with Theatre Heritage Australia, suggested that Viola's memoirs should finally be published.

With the assistance of Viola's daughters and the Tait Memorial Trust, a small team from THA was assembled to complete the task: Elisabeth Kumm, Judy Leech and Simon Piening, with assistance from Mimi Colligan, Frank Van Straten and Peter Johnson.

During the intervening years, much of Lady Tait's vast photo archive had been donated to either the Australian Performing Arts Collection in Melbourne or the National Library of Australia in Canberra. Accessing this archive involved many months of research, including numerous emails between the editorial committee and the Tait sisters. Meanwhile, the text was re-proofed, and preliminary cover designs were undertaken by Belinda Hayball, a graphic designer and friend of the Tait family.

Viola's memoirs are important as both a personal history and a social history, providing not just details of a life in the theatre, but about the theatre in Britain, America and Australia during the middle of the twentieth century.

From studying at the Scottish National Academy of Music in the 1920s, to singing with the Carl Rosa and D'Oyly Carte opera companies in the 1930s and performing with J.C. Williamson Ltd in Australia during the 1940s, then as Mrs Frank Tait (later Lady Tait) entertaining visiting celebrities in the post-war period and being part of the Australian social scene, Viola had an amazing life. Her warm personality, generosity and impish sense of humour are felt through her writing and the many anecdotes contained within these pages.

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Edited by Elisabeth Kumm

Foreword by Richard Bonyngé AC CBE



Tait Memorial Trust



Theatre Heritage Australia

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1. Viola Tait, 1946. Photo: Athol Shmith

Foreword

An enchanting story of the intimate life of a lovely lady. She grew up in Scotland surrounded by theatre and music and as a girl already performed works by Bach, Handel and Haydn.

She spent many happy days with the Carl Rosa Opera singing parts like Adèle, Micaëla and Nedda and then moved on to the D'Oyly Carte Company. She was enchanted with the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire and sang many roles in London and New York before going with them to Australia for J.C. Williamson. In America she tells charming stories of Grace Moore, Lauritz Melchior, Richard Crooks and many others.

I first became aware of Viola Wilson in the very early years of the Second World War when she came to Australia where she sang many roles including Princess Ida and was much loved. She married Frank Tait later to be Sir Frank and as Lady Tait spent her life in Australia. What stories she tells of Tito Schipa, Frances Alda, Danny Kaye, Gracie Fields and Margot Fonteyn. She writes about the formation and success of the Sutherland–Williamson Opera Company in 1965 and how Sir Frank wanted this company to be his last great work.

We spent many lovely and amusing hours with Sir Frank arguing over repertoire and he was very, very understanding. I got to know and love Lady Tait at this time. She was a passionate upholder of theatrical tradition and had a huge collection of theatrical memorabilia. She spent many hours letting me delve through her treasures and teaching me a great deal. She continued writing and being interested in recording her magnificent theatrical life and memories right up to the very end.

A very great lady.

Richard Bonynges AC CBE

Preface

Viola Tait began working on her memoirs in the late 1960s. At the same time she was also preparing manuscripts on the history of pantomime in Australia, the history of radio, and the Sutherland-Williamson Opera Company. In 1971 she published her first book, *A Family of Brothers*, chronicling the contribution of the Tait brothers and J.C. Williamson Ltd to Australian theatre. To this day, the book remains one of the definitive texts on the history of The Firm.

In the years following her husband's death, her daughters grown-up and married, it would have been easy for her to succumb to a comfortable but lonely widowhood. Rather, she redoubled her efforts. Where previously she had been exhausted keeping up with Frank, now others said the same of her. Nightly visits to the theatre, parties, dinners, charity functions and committee meetings, and, after a particularly arduous period, a weekend at Portsea to relax and recuperate, ready to start all over again. All this and still time for writing.

Her second book, *Dames, Principal Boys ... and All That: A History of Pantomime in Australia*, was published in 2001, though she had commenced writing it, like the present memoirs, decades earlier. Following her car accident in 1990 she stopped writing altogether, and it wasn't until 2000, encouraged by family and friends, that she retrieved the manuscripts from her theatre basket.

I was very fortunate to have been 'in the right place at the right time' when work began in earnest on the pantomime manuscript, and was asked to assist Viola in getting it ready for publication. We spent many months together refining the text, verifying the facts and sourcing the images. It was a wonderful opportunity for me and I shall always be grateful to Viola for her friendship and trust. When in March 2001 the book was launched at Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne, the scene of numerous theatrical triumphs in the history of the Tait-Williamson organisation, it was an unforgettable experience. The upstairs foyer was packed, with hundreds of people keen to pay tribute to the author, a wonderful lady of the theatre, who at the age of eighty-nine had achieved this remarkable feat.

Savouring her recent success, Viola was keen not to lose the momentum, and, without drawing a breath, out came another discarded manuscript from the theatre basket: 'I Have a Song to Sing', her memoirs, aptly named after the duet in *The Yeomen of the Guard* sung by Elsie Maynard and Jack Point. As before, we met once or twice a fortnight to work through the text, sorting, rearranging, rewriting, expanding, trimming and reminiscing. Alas, only a few months into our work Viola became ill, and as the visits to hospital became more frequent it became clear that we would not be able to finish our task. I shall never forget

Viola during her last months. She was adamant that she was going to get better, but despite her Scottish determination her body was weak, and on 6 February 2002 she passed away, the manuscript only partly completed.

I am sure that Viola would have been extremely disappointed if the manuscript had been allowed to return to her theatre basket unfinished. Without the encouragement and support of her daughters Sally, Ann and Isla, I would never have been able to finish the work. Viola's girls have been extremely generous, allowing me access to their mother's papers, photos and books, particularly at such a sensitive time. I hope that the final book is something of which they can be proud and will serve as a fitting tribute to a remarkable woman whose life, love and laughter touched so many.

I would like to extend an extra special thanks to Sally, who has made herself available to me on a weekly basis. Thank you Sally for all your help.

Elisabeth Kumm, 2002

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Introduction

When I was first asked to write my memoirs, my immediate thought was, How will I find time to write them? Initially I thought they would only be interesting to my daughters and grandchildren, to browse through and look at photographs of a young grandmother when she was living in Scotland, and to read tales of her career as a professional singer and her times touring the world. It worried me knowing I didn't have a cupboard full of diaries for reference, or a particularly good memory for everyday things. I get annoyed with myself when I think how good fortune has followed me throughout the years but I didn't have the sense at the time to jot down the many interesting experiences I have had.

The only diaries I ever kept were left in safe keeping with my father when I came to Australia in 1940. After I returned to London from a tour of the United States with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company in 1939, my father closed our home in Paisley and joined me in a flat in London for an indefinite period. Before leaving Scotland he had stored all our furniture in a warehouse in Glasgow. In 1941 there was a massive bombing of the Clydeside Docks, and my diaries, along with all our furniture, went up in smoke with one of Adolf Hitler's bombs. Souvenir programmes, love letters and photographs in my desk were all destroyed. I would love to have those diaries now. Fortunately my scrapbook was safe in my theatre basket in London, and has proved an immense help in writing these memoirs.

My memory has improved with practice, and recollections of ordinary everyday events in my childhood don't seem so hazy as I write them down. Perhaps I am conscious of lifting the curtain on my background and reticent about disclosing the stories of my family. Believe me, I am just as nervous about writing them down as I was singing on stage at important first nights at the theatre.

My love of the theatre spans nearly ninety years. Being taken to the theatre as a child was an immense treat for my sister and me. My father also encouraged us to sing and play the piano and make our own amusements. Many a wet and dismal day during the school holidays was spent entertaining ourselves with party pieces, performed for our parents when we were all together after my father returned from Austria-Hungary where he had been interned during the 1914–1918 war. We had never heard of television, but were the proud possessors of a homemade crystal radio set. It was fun playing with the cat's whisker on the crystal and putting on earphones to listen in to music, mainly orchestral and jazz bands relayed from London, Glasgow or Stuttgart, hundreds of miles away. Often oscillating noises spoiled the reception, but when the crystal worked properly it was wonderful.

There really was magic in the air. Neither of my parents had a theatrical background, but my father loved to act and often joined my sister and me in our world of make-believe. He had a keen sense of humour. He could dramatise many of Shakespeare's famous speeches from memory, sawing the air with his arms and making Sir Henry Irving gestures, which were really funny when he hammed it up to make us laugh. He admired Henry Irving and considered him one of the great Shakespearian actors of the nineteenth century. I have never forgotten the joy of those childhood days when my father unconsciously instilled into me grandiose dreams of the stage. And we had an enthusiastic audience in our mother, who was most generous with her applause.

Following my musical studies in Glasgow I was fortunate to be asked to sing professionally, first in the chorus of the famous Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company in Britain and later as principal soprano with several important companies, touring Britain, South Africa, America, and lastly Australia, where I fell in love and in 1941 married my employer, Frank Tait, the youngest of the theatrical family of Tait brothers. Melbourne has been my home ever since. Motherhood and a happy married life, with three little girls and a husband to look after, appealed to me much more than pursuing my career. I decided to retire in 1947 and continue my love of the theatre sitting beside my husband on the other side of the footlights.

Through my husband's firm, J.C. Williamson Theatres Limited and J. & N. Tait Concert Management, I was involved with entertaining many celebrities of world fame, as well as attending the concerts, musical comedies, ballets, grand opera and variety his companies presented to Australian and New Zealand audiences for half a century.

Viola Tait



2. Violet and Gavin Hogg, from a cabinet photograph taken during their time in Hungary.
Photo: E Kozics, Pozsony

CHAPTER 1

Early Days in Pressburg

To begin at the very beginning, I must explain why I was not born in Scotland. My parents, Violet and Gavin Hogg, were born and educated in Paisley, not far from Glasgow. After their marriage they made their home in Pressburg, a town near Vienna on the River Danube in Austria-Hungary, where my father was managing a branch of J. & P. Coats' Mills, a well-known company that was based in Paisley and operated extensively in Europe. My parents enjoyed living a cosmopolitan life in Pressburg among happy music-loving Austrians. I don't remember the house where my parents lived, or the lovely garden lined with peach trees where my sister and I played, but the address was 24 Donaugasse. Both Austria and Hungary belonged to the illustrious House of Hapsburg, which has an exciting history, dating as far back as 1273. Pressburg became part of Czechoslovakia after the First World War, and a great deal of unrest disturbed this beautiful city for many years. Today it is the capital of Slovakia and is called Bratislava.

I was the youngest of three children. My brother, Walter, died from diphtheria when he was just a few months old and is buried in the British section of Pressburg cemetery. In August 1907 my sister Isla was born, and I followed on All Saints' Day, 1 November, four years later. Isla was named after the island of Islay, on the west coast of Scotland, where my maternal grandmother was born. Islay is often called the green isle. Many a happy holiday we had at Bowmore House with our cousins. At night, the white smoke from the peat fires lingered over the village like a cloud, giving out a special reeky perfume mixed with the earthy aroma of Islay Mist Whisky. My sister had distinctive features, with copper-coloured Titian hair and a fiery temperament to match. My hair was red too, but it was straight and insignificant in comparison and my temper was much milder. Isla's striking colouring and features attracted the attention of an eminent portrait painter in Vienna, who happened to be travelling on the same tramcar as my mother. His enthusiasm to paint Isla was genuine, but when they arrived at his studio by special appointment Isla screamed so loudly that my mother realised it was impossible for him to paint such a highly-strung child. She apologised and regretfully left the studio.

I was given my mother's name, Violet Wilson, but when my father went to register my birth the registrar managed to influence him to call me a musical name—like Viola, he said. After repeating it several times, my father liked it and, without consulting my mother, registered me as Viola Wilson Hogg. My mother was delighted!

There was nothing Hungarian about the Hogg family, except their love of nut cakes and *gulyás* (goulash), which my mother learned to cook during the years

she lived in Pressburg. When I was old enough my sister and I spoke English and German with our parents and quarrelled in Hungarian because we knew Mother couldn't understand us. Our Hungarian nurse taught us to speak the language, as well as how to sing Hungarian folk songs. I remember the tunes very well, but no one would understand my Hungarian now! German was the proper language in Austria; only the working class and peasants spoke Hungarian.

Europe was in a state of unrest. The Hapsburg Monarchy, once a great military empire, after a long history of conflict was now spending very little money on armaments. The Austrians were a peace-loving people and were totally unprepared when war struck them so suddenly in 1914. My father often watched poorly clad soldiers drilling in an army barracks, not far from where we lived, and said they were so badly disciplined they couldn't even handle a rifle properly. Political tensions in Europe exploded when the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were assassinated on 28 June 1914 as they were driving through the streets in their open carriage on an official visit to Sarajevo in Bosnia. The incident sparked off the First World War—a bitter war that lasted four years, separated my parents and ended their happy life together in Pressburg.

My father, along with many other British subjects, was interned for the duration of the war. British wives with their families were allowed to leave the country, but our departure was delayed until my mother had recovered from smallpox, an illness that nearly cost her her life and one that she was most fortunate to recover from completely. During her illness, while she was isolated in hospital, her sister Flora came to look after us. My mother improved slowly, but then war was declared and separation from my father was inevitable. All Britishers were under police guard and were completely cut off from Britain. Only German newspapers were available. 'Gott strafe England' (May God punish England) appeared in headlines and on posters all over the country. I was too young to remember our departure from Vienna to Paris in 1915, but my mother and aunt did not forget the hazardous journey from the frontier to the French capital. We cried bitterly when we left our father standing alone at the station in Vienna. Red Cross signs were conspicuous from one end of the train to the other and a large red cross was clearly visible on the roof of the train to warn off enemy planes. My mother lifted the blinds when the train stopped suddenly and saw a dogfight between two aeroplanes almost directly above us. Both burst into flames and spiralled to the ground. Continuous gunfire shook the train and delayed us at different stations until it was safe to continue to pass through the frontier to Basel in Switzerland. My Auntie Flora refused to strip before the German health inspector and protested when they removed a piece of paper she had hidden in her stocking. We nearly lost our connection to Paris until they found out it was only a recipe for nut cake. We had to wait many hours in the company of Russian prisoners who were bound for an internment camp in Germany. My mother bought from them several wooden toys they had delicately carved with an ordinary penknife. Their clothing was quite



3. Viola's parents, c. 1908



4. Cousin Willie Anderson, 1913



5. Viola aged three and a half in the Luxembourg Gardens, Paris, 1915



6. Viola, c. 1916

inadequate for such freezing conditions, and they were glad of any money, food or cigarettes from the Red Cross.

When we finally arrived in Paris we were welcomed at the station by my uncle and aunt, who had been so anxious about our safety. My mother's half-brother, William, was domiciled in Paris and was a director of a Scottish firm, Barry Ostler, which manufactured linoleum. His wife, my Auntie Ann, was French and they lived in an apartment in Rue Saint Roche with their son Willie. We stayed with them until we were able to secure safe transport across the Channel to England.

My cousin Willie, who looked much older than his sixteen years, was a handsome boy. His physique impressed a French inspector, who told him, 'We want men like you to join the army and fight for France.' My uncle feared



7. Viola with her sister Isla, mother, father, Auntie Ann and Auntie Flora, 1913

the worst. When Willie finished school, he, like so many of his friends, joined the French forces, giving a false age. Without any training he was sent to Ypres, where there was heavy fighting, and he was killed before his eighteenth birthday.

The German armies plundered through Belgium into France, leaving devastation everywhere, but were stopped by the Allies before they reached Paris. They tried desperately to capture the Channel ports, but were driven back by the British Expeditionary Forces. Frequent air raids were having a bad effect on ships crossing the Channel. My mother and aunt would later talk about the tragic sights they saw crossing the English Channel to Folkestone on a Red Cross hospital ship. No one slept for the machine-gun fire and the deadly voice of the German guns. Many badly wounded soldiers crossed with us and many never saw England again.

CHAPTER 2

Growing up in Paisley

We eventually arrived safe and sound in Paisley and went to live with my grandfather and three of my mother's sisters—Agnes, Flora and Betty—at 'Ardshiel', the family home in the Paisley suburb of Blackhall.

The town of Paisley lies in Renfrewshire, about twelve miles west of Glasgow, on the banks of the River Cart. From medieval times Paisley had been a weaving town. Shawls were woven on handlooms from woollen and linen threads, and the characteristic teardrop pattern became known as a Paisley shawl. Raw silk was used at one time when it was procurable, but the industry was mainly Paisley yarns. The shawls were very popular, and local women wore them wrapped around their shoulders for warmth in winter. Robert Burns, in his famous poem *Tam O'Shanter*, wrote about a witch who wore a 'cutty-sark o' Paisley harn'.

Paisley was also a major manufacturer of yarn, with Clark's and Coats' the most prominent of the mills. Clark's Mills was the older of the two, established by the Clark brothers in 1812. With the establishment of their mills, the brothers were laying the foundations for a thriving industry that was to contribute to Paisley fame and prosperity during the nineteenth century.

The Coats' Mill was founded in the 1820s by James Coats when he established a small thread-twisting factory behind his home in Ferguslie. Some years later his sons, James and Peter, took over the business, and under their direction, J. & P. Coats' grew into one of the most successful thread mills in Scotland. In 1896 they merged with Clark & Co., and today Coats', a multinational company, is one of the world's largest thread manufacturers.

My maternal grandfather, the Reverend Alexander Wilson, was minister of the Evangelical Union Congregational Church in New Street, Paisley. He was a Border man from Hawick, and after completing his studies in Edinburgh he became a minister at the church, where he remained for forty-nine years. He spent a lot of his own money renovating the building and making it fit to preach in. The church was the second-oldest in the town. During the war, when so many young ministers were fighting for their country, he returned to the pulpit. It was his way of contributing to the war effort. He was greatly loved and respected in the community and his return was not unwelcome. It was often said that he had a poet's feeling for descriptive words when he preached. He never had that ministerial tone of voice that many ministers have. He was a kindly man. He didn't mind the local children, who lived in the back streets and tenements across the road in New Street, using the church grounds as a playground. They jumped the railings and played leapfrog over the old tombstones, making chalk marks for *peever* (hopscotch) on the flat stones covered with moss. Some of his

parishioners complained about this, but my grandfather worried more about the children playing on the streets and felt the church grounds were a sanctuary for children of all religions.

He treasured a Breeches Bible, which had been in his family since Covenanting days, printed in Geneva in 1560 by English exiles who had fled their country of birth for their religion. The name of the Bible was derived from an alteration in Genesis 3.7—‘Gird thy loins with cloths’. In the Geneva edition, ‘breeches’ was substituted for ‘cloths’, the first clothes worn by Adam and Eve. Water marks on parts of the Bible show that it had been hidden down a well to avoid detection by Cromwell’s soldiers. Many of the family names, we are told, are written in blood. I remember sitting on Grandfather’s knee when he read passages of it to us at family worship round the fire in the evening.

My grandmother, Flora Ann McEwan, who died in 1907, came from Bowmore in Islay. My grandfather Wilson was her second husband. Her first husband, Alexander Anderson, had died leaving her with three small children to bring up. Not long after his death she met my grandfather. Their first meeting took place at his church, when she was attending service one Sunday with her



8. *The Wilson-Anderson Family, c. 1890: (standing) William Anderson, Agnes Wilson, Alexander Anderson, Flora Wilson; (seated) Kate Anderson, Flora Ann McEwan, Rev. Alexander Wilson, Sara Wilson; (front row) Henrietta Wilson, Maggie Wilson, Violet Wilson, Elizabeth Wilson*

children. When one of her sons went missing, she enlisted my grandfather's help to find the errant child. Thus began their courtship, and it was not long before Mrs Alexander Anderson became Mrs Alexander Wilson. She and my grandfather had seven daughters. My mother was the fifth. The Wilson girls and the Anderson family were brought up as one family.

My grandfather educated his large family on his minister's salary, supplemented by his private means derived from family farms in Hawick. Education was his first priority. Several of my aunts went to Aberdeen University. The Anderson boys were boarded at George Watson's College in Edinburgh where their father had been a teacher. The eldest son, Alexander Anderson, followed in his father's footsteps and taught French literature at the College.

Religion was an important part of my mother's life, but my father thought less about it. He was forced to attend church as a boy because his grandfather was a minister, and he often told me how, during his courting days, he suffered many restless moments sitting in the minister's pew with my mother listening to her father preach. When he visited Ardshiel my grandparents were always in attendance; they never left any of their daughters alone with their suitors. One of my Anderson cousins, who was nearly as old as my mother, told me that he was with my father one night when my grandparents retired to bed. My mother broke the silence by pulling off her skirt and dancing around the room in her bloomers—quite a daring feat in those days! Before my parents were married my mother taught at the Neilson School in Paisley, in the infant department. She was very good at art and painted china as a hobby. Later, when she lived in Austria, she learned to design and carve wood.

My father's family tree was even larger than my mother's, which means that I have many cousins and aunts and uncles on both sides of the family. Hogg's Dyeworks, owned by my paternal grandfather, stood in Dyers Wynd, close to Paisley Prison beside the River Cart. For over a century the dye works supplied the delicately coloured threads used to weave the famous shawls named after the town. When mechanical devices replaced hand dyeing, the dye works went out of business and my father joined J. & P. Coats' Mills and was sent to Pressburg to manage a branch of their business. His mother, Catherine Cairns, was the daughter of the Reverend Robert Cairns, a minister in Renfrewshire. She died in childbirth when my father was twelve years of age. She was Grandfather's second wife and bore him seven sons and two daughters. The family lived in a large grey stone house in Hawkhead Road, Paisley.

My paternal grandfather's first wife had died leaving him with three sons and a daughter. He married for the third time, a lady from Aberdeen, who was not at all popular with her thirteen stepchildren. There were many amusing stories about Aberdonians being mean and my father believed them all. He called his stepmother the 'witch'. Meanness was something he hated. The 'witch' had one son, Bertie, who became an accountant. I remember him well. I was attracted to his beautiful singing and playing on a Steinway grand piano. After his mother's



9. Violet Wilson (seated right) and her sisters, c. 1900s

death he inherited the large family house and was about to get married when he suffered a severe heart attack and died. He was only thirty years old.

The war had separated so many families in similar circumstances to ours, and until my mother's financial position was secure she was partly dependent on her sisters for accommodation. My aunts loved her unselfish and generous nature and did everything they could to make her happy. There was never any money left over for luxuries, but standards had to be kept up living with my grandfather, as many of his parishioners called at the house for advice and comfort if they had a bereavement in the family. My mother loved her Papa dearly and couldn't do enough for him. Living in a house with so many sisters, all with difficult temperaments, had its problems, however, especially when my mother had two lively children to look after. Her eldest sister, Agnes (Aggie), ruled the household. She was headmistress of the Williamsburgh School, a large public school, and after a hard day's teaching came home tired and irritable. The sisters never discussed their problems in front of us and I never knew until much later why my aunt was so unhappy. Her fiancé, the Reverend Edward Marshall, had been appointed minister of a church at Middelburg in the Transvaal in South Africa and they planned to marry there when he had settled down at his new position. She followed him later, taking with her her worldly goods, her wedding dress and their wedding presents. On arrival, after many weeks at sea, she was told that Edward was terminally ill. They married, but I never heard any



10. Auntie Aggie.

Photo: J. Douglas Ritchie, Paisley

details of their marriage. Her wedding ring, which she left to me, tells her tragic story:

A.W. married E.M.	16.5.05
E.M. died	19.5.05.

Agnes returned home with her wedding presents unopened and remained faithful to Edward's memory, dedicating her life to teaching in Paisley. Isla and I loved her, but didn't get to know how wonderful she was until later in life.

Auntie Flora we knew better. She was with us in Pressburg when our mother was in hospital. Her broken marriage to the Reverend Donald McPherson, a minister on the island of Tiree in the Hebrides, gave her a great deal of anxiety and regret. His drinking problem was the cause of their separation after eight years living on the island. He followed her to Paisley, fortifying himself with

Scotch Courage, and arrived at Ardshiel to claim his wife. One whiff of his breath, standing at the front door, sent Auntie Agnes into a rage. Without consulting her sisters she ordered him to leave the house and never come back again. Afraid of a social scandal in a minister's family, they never divorced, and for the rest of her life Auntie Flora was dependent on her sisters. She lived with her memories and I am sure many times regretted leaving her husband and the beautiful island of Tiree. Uncle Donald reformed and outlived Auntie Flora. When she died he inherited, by Scottish law, one third of her estate. He lived to a ripe old age after he retired from the ministry and lived comfortably in a Church of Scotland home at Inverness. I would love to have heard his side of the story. His name was never mentioned in the family until it was too late. Auntie Flora always bought the *Oban Times*, which gave all the local news from Argyllshire, hoping to find information about her estranged husband. I later learned that he became one of the most popular ministers in Inverness.

My unmarried Auntie Betty, who also lived with us, was next to my mother in age and was gentle and sweet in nature. She held a responsible position in the telegraph office at St Enoch Railway Station in Glasgow. I remember her either rushing to catch a train or hurrying home late after night duty. During the war she was working for the secret service and an expert at Morse code. Sunday was her only day to relax after teaching at Sunday School.

In the privacy of her bedroom, with the door shut, Auntie Betty would light the fire and, in front of us, smoke a scented French cigarette through a white carved ivory holder. Then she would blow the smoke up the chimney to hide the traces from downstairs. During one of her holidays in Paris, my Uncle William had given her several boxes of ladies' French scented cigarettes and a box of cherry brandy liqueur chocolates. He was a most generous brother to his sisters and entertained them handsomely when they visited the French capital.

The seventh and youngest of my mother's sisters, Henrietta (Etta), lived in Paisley with her husband, Dan Lochhead, and their three children. She was daring enough to puff a scented cigarette in front of my Auntie Aggie, who showed her disapproval by leaving the room coughing badly! Henrietta wore fashionable dresses that rustled when she walked and had several diamond rings on her fingers. She played her own accompaniments on the piano when she sang old Scottish songs or 'Danny Boy' in a sweet mezzo-soprano voice, especially for Papa, who showed his contentment by nodding off to sleep.

My Uncle Dan adored his wife. He was a man of very few words and generous to any charity. He owned the *Paisley Daily Express* in New Street near my grandfather Wilson's church and worked very hard. They lived in Potterhill in a large red sandstone house, which he built for the family.

Great preparations went on in the kitchen at Ardshiel when the Lochheads came to supper. We all looked forward to their visit, especially my mother, who loved her little sister. Auntie Aggie was a wonderful cook, and when she came home from school, out would come the baking board and rolling pin, and the house would fill with the aroma of baking. Before long the marble bench in the laundry (which was the coolest place in the house) would be overflowing with hams, cakes and jelly trifles in readiness for the Lochheads' arrival.

My cousin Flora Lochhead was a year younger than Isla and had two older brothers who always wore the kilt. Flora was a tomboy, full of mischief, and couldn't be bothered playing with her two foreign cousins. She made fun of Isla and me and said she had her own friends to play with. We had no friends in Paisley and wanted so much to be like her. Flora had the benefit of security in her early years, while we lived in a bewildering battlefield, being disciplined by several aunts who didn't understand children. We had to be seen and not heard and life was full of 'don'ts'. The Lochheads had everything we didn't have. They had bicycles! Flora could stand on the saddle of her bicycle, holding on to the handlebars, and free wheel down a hill. We were so impressed. One day Flora told me she was showing off to her parents when she fell off and buckled both wheels. She never did it again. Auntie Etta always tried to make Flora look pretty. Wetting her two front fingers with her tongue, she would rub Flora's fringe into a mass of kiss curls to make her look 'a bonnie wee girl', and say with a smile, 'There we are! Isn't she lovely?'

After the war, during the dreadful Depression, I was made to wear the clothes Flora had grown out of. I also inherited her old bicycle with no brakes.

Whenever I wanted to stop I had to put my foot down hard on the front wheel. I'm lucky to be here to tell the story. On an errand for my aunt one day I nearly ran into the brewer's cart, driven by two Clydesdale horses. I didn't see them galloping out of the brewery and swerved just in time, missing them by a few inches. It gave me such a fright that it ended my cycling days on my unsafe boneshaker.

While we lived at Ardshiel I occasionally sneaked into the sitting room and hid in a corner to listen to my mother and her sisters talking together. If they spotted me and thought I had heard anything private they would whisper, 'Be careful, little ears are listening.' A favourite subject of conversation, once they had got rid of me, was Auntie Flora's broken marriage or Auntie Etta's extravagances.

Because we were so cramped for beds, I shared the skylight room over the sitting room with Auntie Flora. The maid slept in the boxroom. At night sometimes I could hear heated arguments downstairs. One time when they were discussing Auntie Flora's future, Auntie Flora left the room and came upstairs crying. Thinking I was asleep she pulled her leather trunk out from under the bed and began to pack. I loved her so much that I cried too and told her that I never wanted her to leave us. We talked for a while until I was so tired I went back to bed and we cried ourselves to sleep together. By morning we had forgotten all about it and the trunk was put safely back under the bed, until the next time.

My mother and my aunts made many sacrifices during the early years of the war. We were all living under stress, though my mother did her best to keep up everyone's morale. We were taught to be compassionate to the poor, eat everything put in front of us without complaining, love our neighbours, and respect the Roman Catholics. Because of my grandfather's strict temperance views, the only drinks allowed in the house were home-made ginger wine, cooking sherry and medicinal brandy. It was a safe and happy world—until I got scarlet fever, which upset the whole household.

With my face as red as my hair, a nurse rolled me up in Auntie Aggie's best swansdown satin quilt and took me in a horse and cab over cobblestones to the Fever Hospital. I remember being carried upstairs to the Fever Ward. Downstairs, with windows close to the River Cart, was the Diphtheria Ward. Both were always crowded. At low tide drowned animals were seen tied with a rope and stone. At high tide water rats swam around looking for food the nurses had thrown out of the windows. It was reported in my uncle's newspaper that a child in the Diphtheria Ward had had its nose bitten off by a rat. The sanitation in the hospital was questionable. My mother worried so much about it. The floors were scrubbed every day with buckets of Lysol and the only heating in the depths of winter was a small coal fire at the end of the ward. I was never allowed out of bed and was too weak to refuse the regular doses of castor oil dished out to me every day. My grandfather came twice to see me after my family was told I had developed complications. He brought

me a picture book and a cake with candles on it for my fifth birthday. He had to change his clothes when he got home in case he spread infection.

I grew so attached to the nurses that I cried when I had to leave them to go home. Nurse Highett was my favourite. I was shy when I got back to Ardshiel, not having seen my mother for several months. Being so long in bed, my legs didn't work properly and I had to learn to walk all over again. When my mother tried to coax me to eat my breakfast, I said, 'Ah doan't want any!' in my best Paisley accent. She was shocked and had to teach me to speak 'properly'. Someone asked me why I was so long in hospital and they laughed loudly when I told them I had had a fever and a chill in my muttons! I didn't think it was at all funny.

I amused myself playing my grandfather's piano that stood by the bay window in the drawing room overlooking the monkey puzzle tree in the garden. I played by ear and could pick out familiar tunes, which I played while holding my foot down firmly on the loud pedal. The door to the room was always kept closed in the daytime when the room wasn't being used so as to keep out the dust. When I had finished playing I had to put the embroidered felt scarf back over the ivory keys to protect them from damp.

My mother taught me to sing a number of songs. 'Beautiful Star' was her favourite, and I was asked to sing it at the Sunday School soir  e in the church hall one Christmas. I had never been on the stage before, and that night was my d  but. I knew all the words, but the audience only heard the last two verses because I swallowed the first with fright. Then I saw my mother sitting in the audience smiling; I gained my confidence and my voice returned to finish the song. I was rewarded with a Gibson's tea bag—a presentation package containing a currant bun, an apple, an orange and a tangerine wrapped in silver paper. Gibson's bakery was located in the High Street and was one of the most popular cake shops in Paisley.

CHAPTER 3

Largs, by the Sea

My mother was advised by the doctor to live by the sea. The strain and worry of the war and having to live with so many at my grandfather's was affecting her health. Largs in Ayrshire was an ideal resort and only thirty miles from Paisley. There was a good train service from Gilmour Street Station that took less than half an hour if the train didn't stop at every station. We rented a flat at 1 Kelburn Terrace in Charles Street. It was large enough for us all to have our own bedroom, and there was even an extra room for our aunts when they came to stay.

We arrived in Largs in 1916, at a time when awareness of the dreadful slaughter and horror of the trench war was at its height. Names like Asquith, Lloyd George, General Foch and General Haig meant little to us then, but they were spoken of with great reverence, and people had confidence in them to win the war.

We had delightful neighbours, the MacKinleys, who lived at number 3. Their daughter was a friend of Isla's, and Willie, their son, was always playing with a toy gun, which he kept sticking down his trousers. We grew up with them, and today my grandchildren are friendly with their grandchildren! Mrs MacKinley and my mother exchanged visiting cards. They saw each other often, and occasionally they would invite other ladies over for afternoon tea.

I well remember Mrs Kilpatrick, another neighbour, who was married to a butcher. He had a butcher's cart which he wheeled every day from the slaughter yard to his shop. It had timber sidings cut in the shape of a sheep. We always knew when Mr Kilpatrick was home, as his cart would be parked on the street out the front of the terraces. Mrs Kilpatrick adored me and always referred to me as her 'wee tot'. She made me a doll out of a black stocking. It had buttons for eyes, a red wool mouth and pigtails, and its head was tied with a scarf knotted at the front. My mother used to read me the story of Topsy and Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* every night, so I called my doll Topsy. Topsy and I were inseparable.

I was old enough to go to my first school. Isla had been to a private kindergarten in Pressburg, but the Largs Public School was quite different. It was the only public school in Largs for children of all classes, rich and poor. We were neither rich nor poor, but my mother liked to think we were genteel.

Largs Public School stood at the top of Brisbane Street and was built and endowed by a great benefactor in Largs, Sir Thomas Brisbane. I never realised the connection with Brisbane in Queensland until I became interested in Australian history. Sir Thomas Brisbane was born at Brisbane House in Largs in 1773. In 1820, on the advice of the Duke of Wellington, he was appointed

Governor of New South Wales. He succeeded another Scot, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, who had instigated free land grants and free passage to many Scots who immigrated to Australia from the Highlands and Lowlands. The school still stands in Brisbane Street, but has expanded out of all recognition.

Brisbane House was a mansion standing in the heather hills of Green Hill, overlooking the Firth of Clyde. The view from the house was magnificent. Arran peaks in the distance framed the background to the greater and smaller Cumbrae Isles. Largs Bay is still one of the many beauty spots on the Clyde and a popular holiday resort in Ayrshire. Sir Thomas was descended from an eminent Norman family who settled in Ayrshire in the twelfth century. He was a distinguished soldier, having served in Flanders, the West Indies and North America with the British Army.

Astronomy was his great passion. We often picnicked near Brisbane House beside the Three Sisters, a group of stone pillars he built on the hillside to help him with his scientific experiments. During his term of office in Australia he introduced vine growing, sugar cane and tobacco plantations and encouraged graziers to breed horses. He was a generous and kind-hearted man, but anti-social and didn't care about being popular. The City of Brisbane and the Brisbane River are named after him. Sir Thomas lived to be the oldest officer in the British Army and died at Brisbane House in 1860. Many districts in Largs are named in his memory and are a reminder of his generosity to Ayrshire. Sadly, Brisbane House was demolished in 1942.

I must admit my early school days in Largs were difficult and frightening because, in the beginning, many thought we were Germans. We had such an unpleasant time that Isla and I had to be protected by the headmaster when we walked to school each day. A gang of rough boys threw stones at us and called us 'German pigs.' They stole our books and slashed Isla's new macintosh coat with a knife when it was hanging in the cloakroom. They only stopped annoying us when the police scared them off. It was my mother's courage and pride that got us through our adversities during the war years without our father. We were afraid to speak German or even to mention the word.

There was a great deal of bitterness towards the Germans and there were a lot of ignorant and stupid people in Largs who carried their hatred too far. If a man was seen in civvy clothes, young enough to be fighting, they would hand him a white feather—regardless of the fact that he may have been on leave or had some good reason not to be in the army. Most women joined voluntary groups, took up nursing, or worked in the canteens that had been established on some of the large estates in the area. The owners of these estates, wealthy ship builders and business magnates, were only too happy to vacate their properties for the benefit of the wounded soldiers, who used them as convalescent homes.

Good news rarely appeared in the newspapers to cheer my mother's spirits. It was a black day when Lord Kitchener was reported drowned on *H.M.S. Hampshire*. His naval cap and large moustache were so familiar, his eyes staring from hundreds of posters, his finger pointing directly at the reader—

‘We Want Men like You to Join the Army.’ Everyone dreaded reading the casualty lists. Hundreds and hundreds of names were listed as dead, missing or wounded every day. My mother often cried and we never really understood why. Although we had many good times, there was always the fear of war and sadness hanging over us. Many people wore black mourning bands or a small black diamond on their coat sleeve when there was a bereavement. It seemed as if the war would never end.

As the conflict dragged on, the fear of German zeppelins meant tighter security at night, even in Largs. Blackouts were necessary and not a chink of light could be seen from any window. We missed seeing Leerie the Lamplighter, who regularly lit the street light outside our window at dusk. He carried a long pole with a charcoal flame at the end of it that never went out. With the pole he would lift a glass flap and light the mantle inside the lamp when he pulled a chain to release the gas. His voice would fade into the darkness as he cried out, ‘Leerie, Leerie’, walking down the street to light the next lamp. We never saw him again.

Memories of Leerie remind me of one of Robert Louis Stevenson’s poems, which captures the mood perfectly.

*For we are very lucky with a lamp before the door,
And Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more;
And O! before you hurry by with ladder and with light,
O Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!*

My mother kept up her German with a Viennese friend in Largs whose Scottish husband was with J. & P. Coats’ and interned in Pressburg with my father. Mrs Fryers and her daughter Isobel were living with her husband’s family for the duration of the war. She spoke very little English and my mother helped her with it and shielded her from hostile shopkeepers who refused to serve a German. There were many embarrassing moments when Mrs Fryers was given short measure at the grocer’s and poor value at the butcher’s. Some shopkeepers even turned their back on her. This infuriated her, and my mother had to be the mediator. One day Mrs Fryers exploded after being given a bag of rotten apples at the fruiterer. In tears she tried to tell them she was Austrian and not German, but, Austrian or German, she was seen as the Hun and an enemy of the Scots. Some ignorant people who didn’t know my mother treated her the same way.

Isobel Fryers was in my class at school and was persecuted like we were. She refused to speak German with her mother and it wasn’t long before she had a good Scottish accent like me. Isla also refused to speak German and pursed her lips in defiance when my mother encouraged her to keep up the language. She forgot most of it and regretted this in later life.

Until rationing was brought in, people stood in long queues for sugar, bread and meat. Poultry was a luxury. Isla and I, along with many others, learned to drink tea without sugar. We didn’t like it at first, but soon got used to it. Everything we ate was labelled ‘mock’. For Isobel’s birthday, Mrs Fryers made

mock ice-cream in a small butter churn she borrowed from the milkman. She filled the churn with her special recipe, then clamped the lid down firmly. Her secret was to pack it in a box of rock salt and freeze it overnight. Next morning we could hardly wait to taste it. We were so disappointed! It tasted just like cold yellow custard. The mixture was made from dried eggs, Lyle's golden syrup, mock cream made with milk powder, water, lard, a level tablespoon of sugar and a pinch of vanilla. I can remember Mrs Fryers saying to Mother, 'Mein Gott! They von't eet it!' My mother kept a special recipe book labelled 'War time recipes only', which gave useful hints, such as how to keep fruit fresh for a long period or how to keep flies off fish and meat in the larder during summer. The secret was to dampen a large piece of muslin in vinegar and sprinkle liberally with white pepper, then cover the food.

Letters from my father were an exciting event. They were all censored, of course. Some were addressed to my mother's married sister, Sara Steel, in Brooklyn, New York, who re-addressed them to my mother in Largs. This was before America came into the war. There was little my father could write about, except that he was well. He told us that police recruits were very suspicious of the British. They arrested him one day when he had wandered out of bounds while walking in the countryside. They took him to the Chief of Police because they found some cooked sausages in his pocket. My father was well known to the chief, who laughed when he saw my father. They were good friends, and between them they ate the suspected poisoned sausages in front of the embarrassed officers!

My father's letters made my mother homesick for Pressburg. Around the fire at bedtime she would reminisce about happier days before the war. She missed shopping at colourful markets, going to the theatre, and sitting in open-air cafes where *Zigeuner* (Romany) bands played romantic music on their violins. They were self-taught musicians and could play anything you asked for without music.

For a short period, Largs Army Camp billeted a regiment of Russian Cossack horseguards. One summer evening they gave an impromptu demonstration of their skills on horseback on the grass promenade stretching from the pier to Barfields. No one, including the organisers, was prepared for the exciting thrills and daring display of horsemanship we saw that evening. There were not enough barricades to protect the spectators, and people who sat too close to the arena had to move back quickly once the show began.

In their military uniforms and Cossack fur hats, the Russians thundered down the promenade, four horses abreast, almost touching each other, shouting war cries, waving swords and sabres, the horses' legs and hoofs flying in the air and churning up the grass. Never before had Largs seen such daring stunts performed at such a speed. At the finish, twelve horsemen in a row commanded their horses to get down on their front legs and curtsy to the crowd. They had a rousing reception. It was a display never to be forgotten and too dangerous to repeat. It took a long time to repair the damage to the grass on the promenade.

The winters in Largs were dark, wet and windy. Sometimes the sea splashed up the main street and the Clyde paddle steamers were unable to make the pier. But every cloud has a silver lining, and the sun shone for me when the minstrels arrived at Broomfields at the foot of Charles Street for a summer season. A large wooden pavilion stood on the stony pebble beach facing the promenade. In winter the pavilion was barricaded up, but in the summer it was alive with Alvin Sawyer and his Smart Set Cadets, who rented it for three months. The pavilion had a proper stage with a row of gas footlights, a few drapes added colour to the walls, and there were chairs where each artist sat. The dressing rooms were behind the stage, almost too close to the sea when the tide came in, and it must have been very cold and damp on a stormy night.

The gas footlights warmed the stage and gave a soft glow to the faces of the actors. Under the enclosure were numbered rows of camp chairs. The stalls were the most expensive at five shillings and you had to reserve them on a Benefit Night. Children under twelve sat on two rows of wooden forms for one shilling and sixpence, right down near the front row under the eagle eye of



11. *Smart Set Cadets, with Alvin Sawyer in the centre, photographed in 1926*

Mr Sawyer, who scolded any noisy children who shuffled their feet on the stones during any serious singing. Outside the pavilion, crowds gathered on the graded embankment to watch the performance for free. A collection box was brought round by one of the artists, and any money was gratefully received. Variety people call this 'bottling'. But many watched the performance for nothing and walked away when the box appeared.

The artists always looked smartly dressed. In the daytime the men wore white sailor caps and reefer jackets, with gold braid epaulettes and tassels, and the ladies wore fashionable short skirts. At night the women changed into more glamorous gowns and put on lots of make-up, while the men wore short mess jackets. The company worked together as a team, right from the 'concerted' opening. They appeared in amusing topical sketches, and each artist performed solos. They had a large repertoire and always finished with a heart-warming finale.

My mother knew where to find me when I was late getting home from school. The minstrels drew me like a magnet. After the matinée one day I followed a group of fans to the stage door to watch the artists coming out. I wanted to look behind the scenes and see what it was like backstage in the dressing rooms. I waited a long time until eventually they came out in single file. Without their paint and powder the bright daylight didn't flatter them. Still stage struck, however, I followed them into town until they disappeared into the White Hart public house. I ran home then, and for the first time my mother was really cross with me.

My favourite of the minstrels was Josie Delaney, the soubrette. When she smiled she had large dimples in her cheeks and she could high kick and sing, dancing on her toes. I longed to have dancing lessons and have dimples in my cheeks. Going to sleep with my fingers in my cheeks didn't seem to make any difference. For weeks I imagined myself to be Josie Delaney. I even practised her songs in front of the mirror when I was alone. One of the songs I remember was 'Let the Great Big World Keep Turning'. But I had to keep my newfound passion for the stage a secret.

The Punch and Judy man also drew large crowds at the pier. When the show was about to commence, a bell would sound and he would shout, 'Punch is here!', whereupon he would climb into his miniature theatre, which looked something like an Australian 'dunny'. The curtain would open to reveal the familiar characters of Punch, Judy, the Baby and the Policeman. Punch was always in trouble with the Policeman, who would give him a bashing with his stick. The Baby would scream, and the louder it wailed the louder the children would laugh. The children loved the Punch and Judy man, and his many different squeaky voices, but sadly he, like the minstrels, have faded into the past.

Largs was quiet in the winter, but in the summer it was packed with holidaymakers, as were many of the Clyde coastal resorts like Rothesay, Dunoon and Millport. You could take a boat all the way from Glasgow and sail from the



12. Viola and Isla, c. 1918

Broomielaw or take a combination of steamer and rail to Gourock or Wemyss Bay, one of the prettiest stations on the whole Clydeside with a mass of flowers in hanging baskets in winter and summer. The MacBrayne's paddle steamers sailed daily down the Firth of Clyde, calling into every pier to collect family holidaymakers and their pets. Pets were allowed to travel free of charge. July and August were the busiest months of the year. The paddle steamers were very picturesque, but they are seldom seen nowadays.

One summer, Her Royal Highness, Princess Mary, paid an informal visit to Largs, arriving on the *Britannia*. Anchored in the bay almost opposite the Largs Pier, the Royal yacht looked like a fairyland at night, her brilliant lights sparkling and reflecting in the water. No one knew exactly what time the princess was coming ashore. Our

Lochhead cousins were staying with us during the holidays. The boys had been playing golf and met us beside the pier just in time for all the excitement of the princess's arrival. We were so close to the Royal party my cousin Wilson touched the fox fur on Princess Mary's coat. Crowds surrounded us as the princess walked towards the Main Street. All I saw of her was the back of her hat. In the excitement, Wilson didn't notice someone in the crowd stealing all of the clubs out of his golf bag—the heavy price he paid for being one of the first to recognise Princess Mary when she came ashore. We notified the police about the clubs, but they were never recovered.

During the holidays, when the weather was warm, paddling and bathing in the sea was a daily routine, even though the water was so cold we could only stay in for five minutes at a time, bobbing up and down in the same spot to prevent cramps. To add to the challenge, the shore was rocky and covered in seaweed, and there were lots of crabs that nipped you if you didn't wear sandals. My mother would prepare a 'chittering bite' (a jam sandwich) for us to eat when we came out of the water, to keep our teeth from chattering. We were no bathing belles in our navy blue cotton costumes. They stretched when they got wet and clung to the body, which meant we got shivery and cold very quickly. My costume had short sleeves to the elbow and hung three-quarters down my thighs to just above my knees. I also wore a rubber bathing cap.

Getting dressed in the bathing box was awful. The salt water stuck to your body and nothing pulled off easily. We also disliked the old toothless attendant who demanded a tip for doing nothing. She used foul language if all my mother gave her was a left-over chittering bite.

Another popular form of entertainment was going to the pictures, and Largs had its own picture house in Waterside Street. As a special treat, Isla and I would be taken to see Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd in a comedy, or Dolores Costello or Norma Shearer in a drama. A weekly serial was an added attraction to ensure a full house each week and usually featured Pearl White, Hollywood's daring stunt actress. The villain would tie the helpless heroine to the railway line and leave her struggling to free herself when the train was seen steaming round the corner towards her. 'To be continued next week' would send loud roars of disappointment through the house. An upright piano in the pit provided the right atmosphere.



13. *Isla and Viola, c. 1923*

CHAPTER 4

The End of the War and Return to Paisley

It was hard to believe that after so many years the war was over. My mother shed tears of joy on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, because my father was coming home at last. The City of Largs threw a garden party in the school grounds, and everyone was invited. It was a wonderful family day. There was a series of children's races and I was anxious to play my part. Dressed in my white linen dress, with a black bow at my neck, I ran with all my might. Flying over the uneven ground, I failed to notice a big cow pat on the grass, which I promptly fell into! It meant a hurried exit home, much to my despair and that of the rest of the family.

My father joined us in Largs before making preparations to return to Paisley. For a long time our mother had made all the major decisions, and now we had father back whom we had to get to know all over again. He spoiled us with presents and agreed to everything we asked for, so we made a great fuss of him. Back in Paisley we had an emotional reunion and many celebrations at Ardshiel, which hadn't changed at all. It was just the same, with lots of aunts around, except that, sadly, my grandfather Wilson had died and we missed him very much.

It took my parents some time to settle down in Paisley. My mother's health was failing, but she tried bravely to carry on without complaining. My father remained with us as much as possible, but he also had to fulfil his responsibilities with Coats' Mills in Pressburg. A permanent position in Paisley was out of the question during the Depression. Shares in the stock market fell dramatically and many people suffered bankruptcy. Coats' shares dropped as well, which was an added disappointment for my parents. We had to tighten our belts until conditions improved. My father's visits to Pressburg depended on the state of my mother's health, and he realised that it was impossible for us as a family to return to Austria permanently.

Isla and I attended different schools. I chose the Neilson School, where my mother had taught and where my grandfather Wilson had been a governor. I was eight years old when I started there. Isla attended the fee-paying Paisley Grammar School. Both schools were co-educational and the standards were high.

The Neilson School was established in 1851 with a bequest from John Neilson, a Paisley grocer, and in accordance with his wishes it provided free education to children of all backgrounds. The school was built on the heights of Oakshaw, a site that had once been used by the Romans as a temporary camp during the occupation of the Antonine Wall, c. 142—c. 200 A.D. The Antonine

Wall was built for the Roman Governor of Britain as the northern frontier of the British Empire and extended from the Firth of Forth to the River Clyde.

The view from the Neilson School was magnificent, overlooking Paisley and the surrounding countryside, with the Gleniffer Braes, the River Clyde shipping docks, Paisley Abbey, Coats' Memorial Church and all the other local landmarks clearly visible. On a clear day you could even see the shoulder of Ben Lomond. The school was Italianate in design and had a large dome with a balcony surrounding it. Whichever way you approached the school there were steep braes to climb because of the lie of the land. The east climb to the school, from Underwood, was the steepest. The path had a long iron rail up the middle to give pedestrians support, which was particularly useful on pea-soup foggy days when you couldn't see your hand in front of you, or in winter when the cobblestones were wet and slippery.

I was forbidden to walk home from school through Browns Place, a notorious slum area at the back of Wells Street, known for riots and drunken shawley women living in derelict tenements. Although it was out of bounds I couldn't resist the temptation to find out what it was really like. My curiosity got the better of me, and one day I dared myself to walk through Browns Place alone, thinking no one would see me. I have never forgotten the horror of seeing such degenerate human beings. The sight has haunted me ever since.

A field of slime with puddles of muddy water was the children's playground, while their parents drank at the public house or in the street. A child in rags ran towards me with outstretched arms, but it fell screaming into a puddle of mud. I tried to pick it up but I couldn't touch it after I saw a mass of infected sores on its bare bottom. Two women were fighting over a bottle of drink, pulling out each other's hair and scratching each other's face till the blood ran down their cheeks, all the while shouting oaths at each other. Terrified, I ran past them into Wells Street, where there were people going about their shopping, unaware of the sordid drama happening just around the corner.

I ran all the way home. The minute my mother saw my white face she guessed where I had been. Still shaking from my ordeal, I confessed. She wasn't cross and comforted me instead, hoping I had learned a good lesson and would be more obedient and never go there again. Browns Place was demolished during the Second World War.

My mother gave me sixpence for my lunch each day. The minute the janitor rang the bell for lunch I would run down West Brae and cross the road to Broomfield's Restaurant, where the smell of pies and chips and hot peas and vinegar wafted through the air, making me feel hungry. I spent part of my lunch money there, reserving enough to buy something at Neri's Ice-Cream Shop in Causeyside Street after school. Neri's was the usual meeting place for some of our friends, including Smith Storie, a boy who lived not far from Neri's shop.

As soon as school was over for the day, my best friend Jeannie Wotherspoon and I would throw our books into our bags and head for Neri's. On the way

we passed Glenn's Fish Shop, where Mrs Glenn would be closing up after a busy day. She would invariably be on the pavement hosing down the fish—Scotch haddock and kippers—which were lying on the marble counter that extended beyond the shop window and into the street. She always wore a waterproof cap, apron and Wellington boots. Her assistants wore the same rubber clothing, but they had clogs on their feet. We had to run past the shop quickly to avoid being splashed.

At Neri's, the main attraction, apart from the ice-cream, was Mrs Neri, who had a face like the Madonna. She was a very large lady, very beautiful, with black ringlets. She wore a low-necked dress, and her two enormous plump bosoms hung down to her waist. She sat behind the counter, resting her bosoms comfortably on the marble slab close to the soda fountain. They remained fixed to the counter, never moving an inch, even when she turned around to the soda fountain to dispense generous helpings of McCallums—ice-creams in a glass tumbler with lashings of raspberry sauce.

Having placed our orders, Jeannie, Smith and I would sit at a table facing towards the counter, from where we were able to observe Mrs Neri and the soda fountain. Our main topic of conversation was Mrs Neri's bosoms. In between giggles and sniggers we would speculate as to whether they were real or stuffed. Perhaps they were frozen! Smith suggested that they were two hot water bottles and tried to imagine how on earth she filled them of an evening. We talked about many other things too, including the facts of life. The word 'sex' in those days only meant whether you were a boy or a girl.

Smith Storie's father had a weaving shop up a lane behind Causeyside Street. We often called in to see if he had any errands for Smith, though in actual fact we were rather hoping that he would give us a penny or two to buy ice-creams. I loved visiting the Storie's shop. Weaving fascinated me and I stayed to watch the men at work, moving the shuttle across the loom as they clicked the wooden frame into position. I always wanted to ask a few questions, but somehow the opportunity never arose. The last hand loom and weaving shop closed in 1942.

Isla made friends with a good-looking boy, Alan O'Gar, who lived not far from Ardshiel. Unknown to us, they met every morning on the way to school. When I found out I kept her secret like a faithful sister. One Sunday morning, however, my mother was not feeling well and could not go to church, so I volunteered to stay home and look after her while Daddy and Isla went together. Mother wanted to write a letter and asked me to fetch the writing pad. I had seen Isla with it earlier, so I went into her bedroom to retrieve it and took it in to my mother without thinking to examine it closely first.

I could soon see by her face that something was wrong, but I still had no idea what it was until my father and Isla came home from church. I was asked to leave the room and heard voices chastising my sister. My mother had found a letter Isla had written to Alan, and Father was furious. He was so cross that he decided to meet with the boy's father and insist that the two young people have nothing more to do with each other. Isla sobbed bitterly and blamed me

for letting her down. I heard her promise Father that she would never speak to Alan again—though I later found out that she did continue to meet up with him on the way to school.

I have happy memories of all the entertainments I enjoyed before I reached my teens. There were many annual features: pantomimes at Christmas, Hengler's Circus on New Year's Day (my father's birthday), and the fair, which was held at the racecourse every year. At the fair, there were dolly-mollys, merry-go-rounds and fortune-tellers. For an extra 3d you could see the 'Smallest Princess in the World', 'The Fattest Lady' or 'The Strongest Man'. They were all freaks of nature and I revelled in the excitement of it all.

I remember my first pantomime, *Cinderella*. Dorothy Ward was the Principal Boy and her husband, Shaun Glenville, the Dame. Dorothy held the record in Britain for being the longest-playing Principal Boy in the business. I thought she was wonderful. I had never seen anyone so glamorous before. One of the highlights of the show was Kirby's Flying Fairies, who flew through the air in an enchanted forest. Another was a demon king, who shot up from nowhere like a rocket, making a startling appearance. Six white ponies pulled Cinderella's diamond-studded coach while she sat there looking the belle of the ball. The Fairy Queen with her magic wand blessed the whole company in a spectacular finale. Half the fun for young and old was the audience participation with the Dame. The idea of the pantomime was to spread fun and goodwill at Christmas. I left the theatre stage-struck more than ever.

We often visited the Paisley Baths in Storey Street. Children from all backgrounds, Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, met every week at the baths, all screaming with delight, running up and down the side of the pool and jumping into the water. Many of the children came from homes that had no baths and no hot water, and their weekly trip to the public baths was their only opportunity to bathe.

The water at the Paisley Baths was much warmer than the sea at Largs. We could stay in the water for an hour for 3d if we wished, but it didn't smell or taste as fresh as Largs Bay! It had its own peculiar tang—a mixture of sweat, urine and chlorine. The water was changed on Mondays and



14. Dorothy Ward, 1920s. Photo: Wrather and Buys

Fridays so it was advisable to go on those days—definitely not on a Saturday morning when the water was black! No one paid attention to a sign that asked:

PLEASE WASH FEET BEFORE ENTERING THE WATER

The Council provided a scrubbing brush and a cake of soap beside a porcelain tub with a running cold-water tap for the purpose, but no one took any notice. Everyone was too eager to get into the pool.

It was at the Paisley Baths that I learned to swim, but not very well and not without a few duckings. I learned at the shallow end with the help of a well-darned canvas belt. The belt was attached to a wire and suspended from a pulley on wheels above the pool; it was pulled along by an attendant who called out instructions. I was paddling along when suddenly the belt burst from under my stomach and I sank right down to the bottom. My new rubber cap came up first and I followed a few seconds later with wet hair, spluttering, breathless and green, having swallowed mouthfuls of dirty water.

We spent many summer holidays on Islay and in Ardrishaig where my father's brother was a minister of the United Free Church. The Manse was opposite the number 1 lock of the Crinan Canal, where large and small yachts passed through on their way to Crinan, avoiding the stormy Mull of Kintyre.

The thirteenth of April 1924 was the saddest day of my life. After a year of failing health, my mother died at the age of forty-five. She herself had given us the courage and strength to face the time when she would no longer be with us. Her resignation, faith and beauty of mind were exceptional. A minister who had known my grandfather said, after he had visited my mother many times, that she was a saint and an inspiration to all who tended to her during her illness. Everyone loved her; even the little paper boy who delivered our papers humbly brought a bunch of flowers to her funeral. Her passing cast a great sorrow and shadow over us all. It took me a long time before I could even speak her name, it distressed me so much. My mother's three devoted sisters took her place in my life and I shall always be indebted to them for their love and guidance.

But even in our saddest moments in life we can smile. Mrs Groden, our hard-working Irish daily maid, was very poor and worshipped my mother, who was very good to her family. She wanted so much to pay her respects and bring her children to a Protestant funeral in spite of a strict rule that Catholics were not allowed in a Protestant church. My aunts didn't recognise Mrs Groden when she laid her simple bunch of violets beside the coffin. My mother had given her a black tailored coat and a black velvet hat trimmed with ostrich feathers that she had bought in Paris because she knew she would never wear them again, and Mrs Groden wore them to the funeral with the greatest of respect.

My father returned many times to Vienna and Budapest while Isla and I were still at school, and we were looked after by our aunts at Ardshiel. I am ashamed to say that I never concentrated enough on my studies. It was different not having my mother, who had made me do all my homework. Mischief, music and English were my best subjects. Jeannie Wotherspoon and I sat at the same



15. *Viola's mother, c. 1900*

desk. We also shared the same sense of humour and were always in trouble. We teased the boys who were shy. There were a couple of farmers' sons in our class, most amusing boys, who were just as mischievous as we were, bringing mice in their pockets and letting them loose in the class. I often wish I could apologise to a shy, red-headed boy whose name was Greer, who couldn't pronounce his Rs properly. He blushed to the roots of his red hair when Jeannie and I made fun of him while he read a verse of poetry, standing in front of the class, shaking like an aspen leaf.

Twice I had the 'taws' or strap, once from Donald Campbell, the Head Master, for laughing in Bible class, and the other from Mr Fortune, my French Master, who was a brute and strapped me hard on my left hand because he said I was talking. I got two straps when I said I wasn't—though I probably was about to say a few words. Mr Campbell knew Auntie Agnes, and I was afraid that he might tell her of my misdoing. I never did find out if they spoke, but I had a nasty bruise on my wrist, which I hid under my sleeve in case my aunt saw it. I was afraid of Mr Campbell. He rarely smiled. He never removed his bowler hat unless it was to scratch his bald patch, and his white hair stuck out under his hat in a massive fringe. When he was cross his white moustache, twisted at both ends, reached his ears.

Sundays were mainly family days at home with my aunts; going to church was the routine when my father was in Budapest. My special boyfriend had a noisy motorbike and, to annoy me, would appear almost alongside when we were walking to church. I was severely reprimanded for turning my head to look at him, and when he started blowing his horn my aunts got very cross indeed.

On Sunday afternoons I usually walked with Jessie Morrison up the Gleniffer Braes to the Bonnie Wee Well, a natural spring built into a fountain for thirsty travellers. The scenery is beautiful, with the River Clyde and the shipyards at Clydebank in the distance where the *Queen Mary* was first born. She grew into a grand lady of the sea and was launched by royalty. The braes were alive with heather as the road got steeper and steeper. It is no wonder that the Paisley skyline has proved such an inspiration to artists, poets and architects. The Gleniffer Braes are a reminder of Robert Tannahill, the weaver and poet who lived in a thatched cottage in Queen Street. He was a great admirer of Robbie Burns, and was one of the founders of the Burns Anniversary Society in Paisley. Although his poetry is not as well-known as that of Burns, it deserves greater recognition. Many of his poems are evocative of his home town and the beauty of the countryside. I am a great admirer of his work.

I continued to enjoy my school days with my friends, but the years passed quickly and soon it was time to think about my future and leaving school. I was fourteen years old. I missed my mother dreadfully and felt lost without her. Isla did her best to help me. It was her responsibility to manage our household after our mother died, though she did this rather reluctantly. She went to a domestic science school and practised her cooking on my father and me. She also learned dressmaking, and I was her guinea pig. She made me a coat with material Auntie

Betty had bought through the stolen goods and unclaimed parcels department at St Enoch Railway Station. The coat was pure wool and warm in winter, but the colour was an unfortunate pink, which clashed with my red hair. To make matters worse, the dressmaker had cut one side of the material and Isla had cut the other, making one lapel almost as high as my shoulder. It was a disaster and I hated wearing it. To hide my embarrassment I would hold my hand over the faulty lapel to cover up the mistake. Sometimes I pinned a bunch of pansies over it, but I still felt lop-sided and was glad when I grew out of it.

Isla had a different temperament from me, and things rolled off her back easily. She thought housekeeping and minor chores like sewing on buttons and darning socks were boring. She loved social activities like drinking coffee in the Café Riche with her night teacher, who was a married man. Gossip spread quickly, and Isla was in the firing line. She was rarely at home when I returned from school, so I went to my aunts'. Isla found them too bossy and there was always a difference of opinion between them over responsibility.

I was delighted when she was given the position of goalkeeper with the Cochran Park ladies' basketball team. I went to watch her first game, which was against an important Glasgow side. I was watching the match but soon wondered what had happened to Isla. She was not putting up a fight to stop the goals rolling in. It got so bad that the score was twenty goals to nil! Later, Isla said she had felt nervous and couldn't stop her opponents coming at her. Needless to say, a new goalkeeper was engaged to replace her.

My sister, at seventeen, attracted a long line of admirers who were anxious to accompany her home after night school. My father often met her halfway, but with my help she found ways and means of avoiding him. I envied the way she flirted with the boys and always managed to have a few of them keen on her company. Flirting didn't interest me, and we often quarrelled when I told her she was deliberately attracting the boys.

My friends were local boys, either younger or my age. I had never experienced any of the kissing or petting that went on with some of the girls who were considered 'fast'. Isla thought she would educate me and invited me to join a group of her friends. My partner, Callum, was about twenty years of age. He came from a neighbouring village and I vaguely knew him. I didn't find him attractive at all, but I accepted the invitation to please Isla. It was a hot summer evening in Argyllshire. It never gets dark before 10.00 pm, so we went out for a walk to Inverneil, a beautiful spot, to look at the view. While we were sitting on the rocks surrounded by clumps of purple heather, Isla suddenly decided to leave me alone with Callum while she went off to explore the rocks down further with her friends.

I had exhausted myself making conversation with Callum—when suddenly he grabbed me. He was about to kiss me when a swarm of midges attacked us! They came from nowhere, like a cloud, and were attracted to the brilliantine he had plastered on his hair. His head and face were covered in them. He was so miserable, and I couldn't stop laughing at him. Inverneil is famous for its

midges. I was thankful the midges had got me out of my awkward situation. I felt so mean that I was not in the least sorry for him, but I did my best to cheer him up when I said it was time to walk home without waiting for the others.

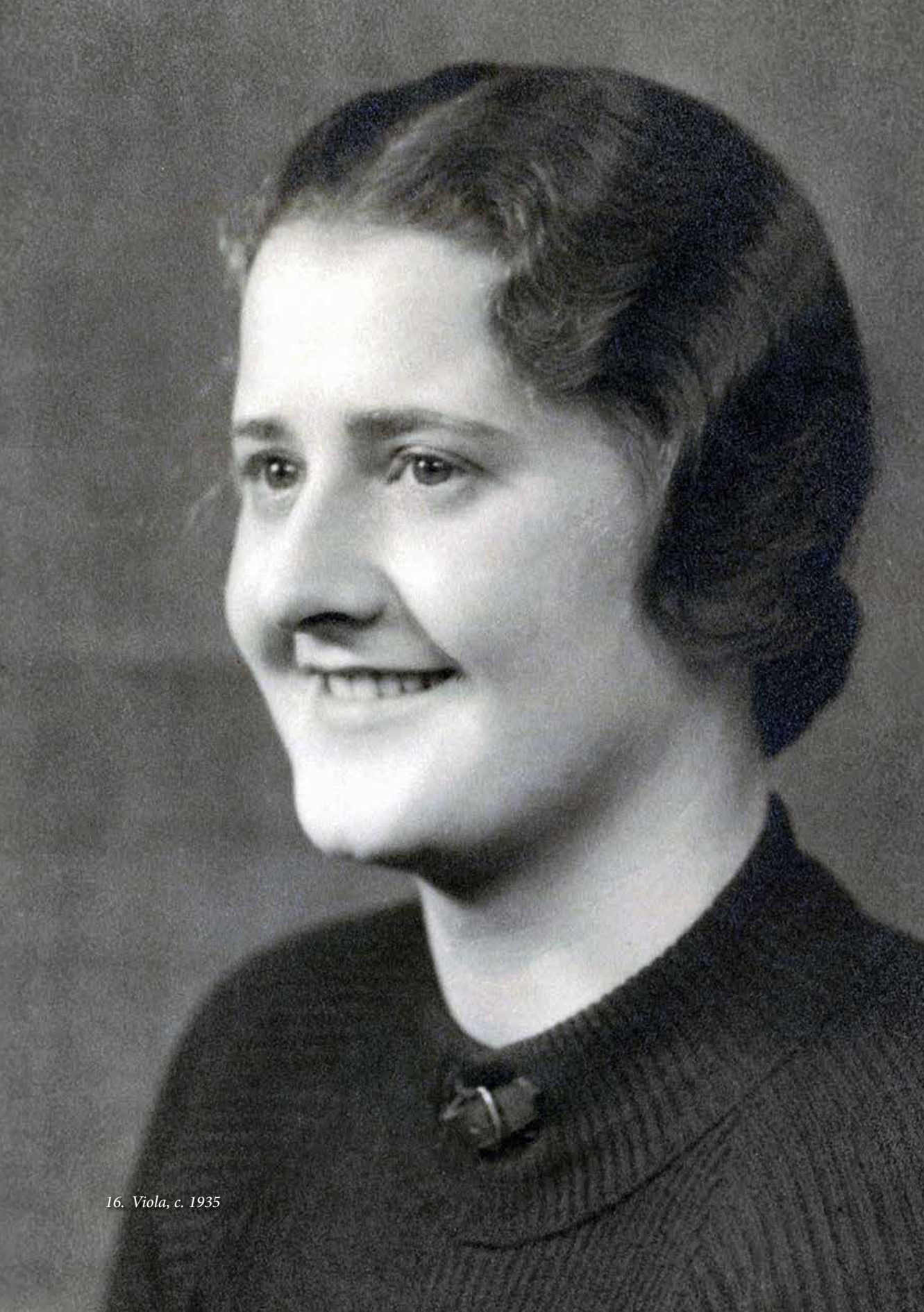
Of Isla's many boyfriends there was one in particular, Campbell Durie, a Scottish doctor, whom she had met at Ardrishaig and whom we hoped she would marry. Finally he popped the question and they announced their engagement. At their wedding, I was one of the bridesmaids. It was a wonderful wedding and Isla was very happy, finally realising what it meant to be a doctor's wife. Campbell's practice was in London, which meant Isla would be leaving Paisley, and I would have to take over the responsibilities of housekeeping and looking after my father.

My three aunts continued to live in harmony at Ardshiel and took a keen interest in all my activities. Despite her stern exterior, Auntie Agnes had mellowed somewhat over the years. She was keenly observant and had a kind expression in her brown eyes. I really loved her and she regarded me as her own daughter.

I had a few special boyfriends whom I met every week at dancing class where I was learning Scottish country dances—'The Eightsome Reel', 'Strip the Willow' and 'The Dashing White Sergeant'—as well as the latest foxtrot and tango. I was awfully good at kicking up my heels dancing the Charleston, which was all the rage. Flat chests, shingled hair with a boyish look, short straight skirts and the shimmy-shake were the fashion for the girls. The boys had motorcycles and wore plus fours and Oxford bags, and on Sundays they changed into dark suits and bowler hats.

I spent a great deal of my time with my father. My doting boyfriend, George, often included 'Daddy' when he wanted me to go to the pictures with him. My father was most generous, and in return included George when we went to the Scottish Orchestra or a musical. Glasgow theatres on a Saturday belonged to my father and me—any Shakespeare play with John Gielgud or Peggy Ashcroft. We thought nothing of going to a *matinée* and then booking for a different programme in the evening.

The next problem was my future, which my aunts took very seriously. They discussed it with my father. I took piano and singing lessons from the organist at our church and my ambition was to have a career in music. I promised I would work hard and pass my leaving certificate and then study music at the Glasgow Athenaeum School of Music. It is a sad day when you leave school and your friends and walk into another world, another phase of your life. But I was happy with my decision and determined to succeed.



16. Viola, c. 1935

The Academy

I was seventeen when I enrolled at the Glasgow Athenaeum School of Music¹ to study piano with Miss Heap, and passed many London Royal Academy of Music exams with honours. John Ireland was the examiner and quite a famous composer. Two years later I became a full-time student, studying with Francis Harford, one of the best singing teachers in Britain and a pupil of the famous De Reszke brothers, who sang many times with Nellie Melba in Europe.

I had looked forward so much to becoming a full-time student and hoped to have a degree when I graduated. Dr William Gillies Whittaker was appointed Principal of the Academy in 1929, and it blossomed under his expert direction. He was also the first to be appointed to the new Gardiner Chair of Music at Glasgow University, where he established the first Faculty of Music. He wrote numerous books on choral works and was one of the finest choir masters in Britain. One of his first achievements at the Academy was to establish a Bach Choir, where I was a soloist as well as a member of the choir. We gave monthly recitals that drew on Bach's entire repertoire of cantatas and chorales, accompanied by the Academy's advanced students' orchestra under Dr Whittaker's direction.

Dr Whittaker chose me to sing the soprano solos when he presented Bach's *St Matthew Passion* at St Andrew's Hall in Glasgow. Part One was performed in the afternoon, followed by Part Two in the evening. Evelyn Rothwell, who would later become John Barbirolli's second wife, played the oboe solos. Barbirolli took a keen interest in our rehearsals, offering encouragement and often attending our opera class. He was the resident conductor of the Scottish Orchestra and built it into one of the leading orchestras in Britain. He was later knighted for his contribution to the Arts.

Every year the opera class staged excerpts from oratorios and operas at the Athenaeum Theatre. The School of Art students designed and made our costumes as part of their training. It was an excellent arrangement and taught the students theatre design. We performed many works under Dr Whittaker's baton, including Handel's oratorio *Saul*, in which I sang the role of Merab, Saul's favourite daughter. The 'Dead March' was a feature of the production. On another occasion we presented Purcell's *King Arthur*. I had fun playing Cupid, balancing myself precariously on a pedestal with my arms outstretched, holding a bow and arrow in the air while singing 'What ho! thou genius of this isle, what ho!' Handel's oratorio *Jephtha*, Bach's *Coffee Cantata*, the delightful *Bastien and*

1. Renamed the Scottish National Academy of Music in 1929.

Bastienne by Mozart, and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* were all staged during my student days. It was invaluable experience to share the principal roles with some of my fellow students. We also attended a Dalcroze Eurhythmics class as part of our curriculum.

In 1933 I met Duncan Morison, a new part-time student at the Academy who had won a scholarship to further his studies in composing. Duncan was also an excellent natural pianist and had accompanied many prominent singers in the West Highlands, where he was well known. He had a shock of black hair, an impish and naive sense of humour, and always wore the kilt, complete with tartan socks (sometimes with holes in them) and brogues. He came from Stornaway in Lewis and was a kinsman of the famous seventeenth-century harpist Roderick Morison. Dr Whittaker thought a great deal of Duncan's talents and made him 'sit in' on our Bach Choir rehearsals and study the scores. Duncan was working on an arrangement of a group of folk songs that had been handed down orally from generation to generation in the Hebridean world of poetic legend and song. We became good friends, and he asked me if I would like to sing the 'Lewis Bridal Song', a piece he had arranged from a traditional Gaelic song and hoped to publish. He lived in a rented room in Bath Street, where we rehearsed. Books, cushions, tartan rugs and music were scattered on the floor—I think he slept there too—and behind a make-shift screen was a pail of water where he washed his hands. A bunch of yellow marigolds, his favourite flower, rested on the upright piano.

I had never met such a fascinating personality. His voice had a soft, husky Highland lilt and his sense of humour was infectious. He introduced Bunty Davie, my friend from the Academy, and me to his friend Sydney MacEwan, who had been studying singing in London and who had returned to Glasgow for engagements at the Gaelic Society with Duncan accompanying him. Together they were a superb team. Sydney's tenor voice was compared to John McCormack's, who by this time had retired to his estate in Ireland. McCormack was Sydney's favourite singer.

Sydney was a university graduate in the Arts and was a teacher before he became a professional singer. He was much more sophisticated and quieter than Duncan, who delighted in making fun of his own innocence, coming from the dreamy island of Lewis. Duncan had a wealth of amusing and entertaining stories, which he told in his distinctive way. On one occasion, the four of us sat in the Gods to see John Gielgud in a play. Duncan had never seen such grandeur on the stage before. His remarks nearly got us put out of the theatre during one of the serious moments of the play when he laughed out loud at Gielgud crossing the stage swathed in a gold cape with a long train behind him.

I taught piano at home and had quite a number of young students to teach every week. On Saturday mornings I organised a percussion band, which my students loved. I began to get a few professional engagements, singing Handel's *Messiah* and giving lunch-hour concerts at the university, earning a little money, £1-1-0 a time.

My first taste of singing and acting with dialogue was with an amateur Gilbert and Sullivan Society in Stirling, on the east side of Scotland. The society invited me to sing Phyllis in *Iolanthe* in their annual production. I stayed with Bunty Davie, who was a violinist and who led the orchestra in the evening performances. My week in Stirling opened up a whole new world for me, singing every night with a most enthusiastic cast. I had no doubt whatever in my mind that I wanted to continue with a stage career.

Bunty and I decided we needed more experience. We wanted to form a concert group and invited some of our friends from the Academy to join us. With Bunty on violin, Duncan on piano, Sydney singing tenor, and me the soprano, we gave concerts as far away as Fort William, Ardrishaig and on Islay. Living in various digs, dropping brogues on the floor at 2.00 am, which annoyed the landlady, and laughing at Duncan's humorous Highland stories until the small hours of the morning, all added to the fun of touring.

It all came to an end in 1934 when Duncan and Sydney were invited by Lady Londonderry to give a recital at Londonderry House in Park Lane for Her Royal Highness the Duchess of York (later the Queen Mother). The cream of London society attended. The pair's performance was so unique and refreshing that they were then invited to the Londonderrys' estate in Ireland, where they



17. Duncan Morison and Viola, c. 1934

CLASSIC COMPOSED AT TWELVE

Beautiful Operetta By Students

STUDENTS of the Scottish National Academy of Music provided an evening of plays and operetta in the Athenaeum Theatre, Glasgow, last night.

The Principal apologised for changes in the original programme announced, which included a ballet in "The Tempest," with Locke's music, but this had to be abandoned through the illness of Miss Constance Herbert, the producer, also Miss Crawhall-Wilson had to withdraw for the same reason from her share in the production of Mozart's operetta, "Bastien and Bastienne."

Special interest was attached to the performance of Mozart's operetta, which came last on the programme. The story concerns the loves of Bastienne (a shepherdess) and Colas, and final reconciliation, through the aid of a supposed magician. It was written when the composer was twelve years old, and is a marvel in charm of melody, also clever moulding of the music into its slight dramatic action.

The part of Bastienne was taken by Miss Viola Hogg, who used her delightfully pure soprano voice with artistic skill in the aria, also concerted music allotted to the character. Mr. William Campbell as Bastien sang and acted well.

Mr. John Nobbs as Colas gave a

well thought out interpretation of the wily magician and sang artistically. Dr. Whittaker conducted, and altogether the performance went with a brightness in keeping with its spirit of light comedy.

An abridged version of Beaumarchais' "Barber of Seville," produced by J. A. Miller, opened the programme, and all the characters were skilfully sonated.

As overture and entr'acte, Symphony No. 55 in E Flat was by the orchestra in a highly manner. We had also a story "Rappaccini's Daughter," by Nathaniel Hawthorne, produced by Mr. P. Sieds. This is a very beautiful and its fine qualities were realised all the members of the cast in the form.

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Mid Argyll Girl Guides.

RALLY AT ARDRISHAIG.

On the invitation of Miss Una Campbell of Inverneill, Mid Argyll Divisional Commissioner, 125 Girl Guides and Brownies, with their officers, were entertained in the Public Hall, Ardrishaig, on Saturday. The intention was to have had a picnic at Inverneill, but unfortunately weather conditions prevented this. However, the rally fully attained its object—to afford members from various parts of the district an opportunity of becoming better acquainted as there were representations present from Lochgilphead, Ardrishaig and Tarbert.

Miss Una Campbell took the salute as the girls marched into the Hall to the strains of piob mhor, played by Piper M'Farlane.

After the District Commissioner had extended a cordial welcome to her guests and made a few appropriate remarks, a programme of dancing by the Guides and original games was gone through, the enjoyment of the afternoon being greatly added to by the exquisite rendering of solos by Mrs. Murrill, of the London Carl Rosa Opera Company, and Miss Campbell of Inverneill, Miss Viola Hogg playing the accompaniments in a highly proficient manner.

Miss Campbell expressed regret that Mrs. Stewart (Fasnaelich), County Commissioner, was unable to be present, but she had sent a letter, in the course of which she expressed the hope that they would all enjoy meeting one another. She would think of them keeping the Guide promise—first, by appreciating all the beautiful things in land or sea that God has given us; secondly, by remembering the King when they sang the National Anthem; and thirdly, by being ready to help one another to enjoy the happy meeting. She trusted they would take home with them bright smiles and helpful hands.

Before dispersing, Miss Una Campbell was given three hearty cheers for her interest in the Guide movement.

TWO PLAYS AND AN OPERETTA

Scottish National Academy of Music's Triple Bill

ING PROGRAMME

as presented by the Scottish Academy of Music in Glasgow last night, two plays and an operetta were included in the programme. The first was a new version of Beaumarchais's "Le Figaro"; a little play founded on Hawthorne's story, "Rappaccini's Daughter," and Mozart's juvenile operetta, "Bastien and Bastienne."

One of the things for students of an old thing to become accustomed to is that there is no better training than in the actual performance of a comedy like this one of Mozart's. In the actual performance good points in clear speech and good characterisation, and weak points in slow pace and too many pauses in the actual performance will remove. "Rappaccini's Daughter" is a touching story of a scientist who experimented with the perfumes of flowers, leaving her to inoculate her daughter with the poison, and unintentionally with the poison, played with feeling, and the slow pace suited the subject and helped the atmosphere.

After that the operetta was done, and briskly under Dr. Whittaker. There is little actual dramatic interest in the little actual dramatic interest in the operetta, but Mozart, even at the age of 12, wrote music that is often charming—though it is not always easy for a singer to make some of the long solos effective on stage. Congratulations go particularly to Miss Viola Hogg, who sang well and varied her parts in an easy way, and to Mr. John Campbell, who was entertaining as the Magician, and over-acting the part. The small orchestra did its part well. H. K. W.

were entertained along with many distinguished guests, including royalty. It was the beginning of a successful career for Sydney MacEwan, who became world famous singing Irish and Scottish songs. The Australian Broadcasting Commission invited Sydney and Duncan to tour Australia and New Zealand together in 1936, and the tour was highly successful. Archie Longden, who brought singers John Brownlee and Florence Austral to Australia in the 1930s, was their manager. When they returned to Britain the pair separated; Duncan returned to Lewis, while Sydney became a priest in the Catholic Church.

The last time I saw Duncan was when I was in London with the Carl Rosa Opera Company, and he was about to leave for Australia and New Zealand. He invited me to tea in his rooms in St John's Wood. He was living permanently in London then. It was like old times. He hadn't changed one bit. The room was larger but filled with the same books, scores, tartan rugs and an upright piano. Behind a makeshift screen there was a much larger pail of water where he washed his hands. I didn't see him again. He never married, and on his return to Lewis became affectionately known as the 'Lord of the Isles'.

GRAND THEATRE

LEEDS

H. B. PHILLIPS presents

THE

ROYAL CARL ROSA OPERA

"The Carl Rosa is happily, still a National Institution."—*Vide Press.*

ONE WEEK commencing MAY 2nd, 1938

MON.	VERDI RIGOLETTO	7-30
TUE.	PUCCINI MADAM BUTTERFLY	7-30
WED.	VERDI LA TRAVIATA Story from Dumas' "Lady with the Camelias" Ballet from Verdi's <i>I Vespri Siciliani</i> in Act 3	7-30
THUR.	STRAUSS DIE FLEDERMAUS WITH BLUE DANUBE BALLET	7-30
FRI.	50 MINUTES LATER THAN OTHER EVENINGS TRAUSS DER ZIGEUNERBARON (THE GIPSY BARON) New production of this great Comedy Opera, by the Composer of <i>Die Fledermaus</i>	8-0
SAT. MAT.	BIZET CARMEN	2-0
SAT. EVE.	GOUNOD FAUST (with Ballet)	7-30

Guest Artistes specially engaged:

LUELLA PAIKIN
in *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*

ROSE ALPER
in *Faust*

HELEN OGILVIE
PAULINE MAUNDER
VIOLA HOGG
BETTY THOMPSON
ELISABETH AVELING
IVOR JOHN
JOHN MYRDDIN
JOHN TORNEY
HUBERT DUNKERLEY
LEYLAND WHITE
GEORGE HANCOCK
HOWELL GLYNNE
PHILIP BERTRAM
KINGSLEY LARK

Conductors:

CHARLES WEBBER

KEITH DOUGLAS

MICHAEL MUDIE

KINGSLEY LARK—Production—JOSEPH PLAUT

Stage Director	-	-	-	Kingsley Lark	Leader of Orchestra	-	-	-	Rosa Sorevking
Publicity	-	-	-	Bertram Blackwell	Principals' Dancer	-	-	-	Doris Baker
Stage Manager	-	-	-	Liddell Peddison	Business Manager	-	-	-	Mat. C. Byrne

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The Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company

In March 1935, Glasgow opera lovers welcomed the arrival of the Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company at the King's Theatre in Bath Street for a two-week season, after an absence of several years. The company received a great deal of publicity in the papers and it was difficult to secure seats. When a limited number of students from the Academy were given the opportunity to sell programmes and see the operas in return for their services, Helen Figgins and I jumped at the opportunity, as it was a good way of getting to know and see the operas for nothing.

One night, after Helen and I had sold all our programmes, we went into the theatre to watch the performance. I saw two vacant seats next to an elderly gentleman who was sitting on the aisle. As we passed him I tripped over his walking stick and almost landed in his lap. At interval he was most apologetic, and I was too, thinking I had stood on his foot. I noticed that he had a delightful Irish accent and was very knowledgeable when we discussed the opera. When I told him that Helen and I were students at the Academy, he asked us many questions about singing, without revealing who he was. Then he asked us if we would like to audition for the forthcoming Jubilee Season the company was giving at the Lyceum Theatre in London, and we were a little confused. All was made clear, however, when he explained that he was Mr H.B. Phillips, the owner of the Carl Rosa. Naturally we accepted his offer!

To have six weeks in London was too good to be true, and we decided to keep the audition a secret in case nothing eventuated. We were duly notified that it was to be held on the stage of the Theatre Royal. On the appointed day, two very nervous young girls arrived at the stage door with opera scores under their arms. The stage manager introduced us to Mr Charles Webber, the conductor, who was to accompany us on the piano. He was very helpful and put us at ease with his sense of humour.

As I walked onto the stage the footlights were on full, so I couldn't see who was sitting in front. I was quite dazzled by the lights, which added to my nervous tension. I sang 'The Jewel Song' from Gounod's *Faust*, managing the last top B without any effort. Mr Webber played the accompaniment beautifully. Helen followed with Siébel's Aria from Act 3 of the same opera. She didn't sound at all nervous and sang well. Once we had broken the ice we felt more at ease, finishing with a duet from *Madame Butterfly*—'Shake that cherry tree till every flower'. More than the cherry tree was shaking by the time we finished the duet! A voice from the stalls called out 'Thank you girls. Come to the stage door tomorrow

at 11.00 am.' We couldn't see anyone for the bright lights, but later learned that Mr Phillips and Kingsley Lark, the bass-baritone and director, were among the audience watching our audition.

It sounded encouraging and we eagerly awaited their verdict. Next day, when we arrived at the theatre, Kingsley Lark informed us that our audition had been successful. We were invited to join the company in London and sing with the chorus for a six-week season at £3-0-0 a week, on the condition that we paid our own return fares to London. The company was presenting *Die Fledermaus* with a double cast, augmented chorus, and orchestra. A special feature was the Blue Danube Ballet, showcasing the Rosa's principal dancer Doola Baker. We accepted, leaving our names and addresses for further contact. We left the stage door bursting with excitement and headed straight to the Academy to break the good news to our friends.

Mr Harford, my teacher, didn't approve at all and wanted me to cancel the arrangements. He wanted me to continue to sing Bach, Handel and Mozart, where he said I had a future. His words of wisdom fell on deaf ears. After all, the engagement was only for six weeks and it was an offer too good to refuse.

Helen and I left Glasgow on the Royal Scot night train, bound for London, our first big adventure together. We were good friends and glad of each other's company. My sister Isla met us at the station and generously allowed us to stay



20. Viola with Charles Webber, conductor with the Carl Rosa, c. 1936

with her and her husband at their home in Isleworth during our time in London. My father joined us several weeks later for the gala opening.

At 10.00 am on the appointed morning, we arrived at the stage door of the Lyceum Theatre for our first rehearsal of *Die Fledermaus* with the company. Just to walk onto the stage and look into the vast theatre with the curtain raised was exciting. The stage was so immense it was easy to get lost in the wings trying to find your way to the dressing rooms. The Lyceum has a long history of spectacular productions. Many great artists have trodden its boards—Sir Henry Irving and Ellen Terry among them.

At the first dress rehearsal, Kingsley Lark selected our partners and positions for the Ballroom Scene. Helen and I were given a front row table. My partner, a tenor, was a red-haired Scot from Aberdeen, Stanley Young. Helen's was a South African baritone, Charles Dorning. Like us, they were only engaged for the London season, but unlike us they had been in several other London productions. We rehearsed every day for three weeks without pay.

Neither Helen nor I knew much about make-up. We were told to buy Leichner greasepaint sticks No. 5 and No. 9. The rouge and eye make-up we bought at Woolworths without consulting anyone. A number of tall, beautiful showgirls were engaged to dress the stage in the Ballroom Scene. They were pretty tough and unfriendly, but they knew all the tricks with make-up and were very professional. Like a pair of country cousins, we watched them through our mirror putting on their make-up. We wondered why they kept a candlestick on their dressing table. After they had powdered off, they lit the candle and dissolved a lump of 'hot black' in a spoon over the flame, then dropped small black beads on the edge of every eyelash with a fine brush. It was an inexpensive and effective substitute for false eyelashes—but you had to be experienced in the art, otherwise you ended up with a pair of black eyes, like Helen and I did on several occasions! We annoyed one of the showgirls sitting next to Helen by constantly borrowing her eyelash paraphernalia and her glue for our kiss curls. We never did master the art, although we tried hard.

I shall never forget the excitement of the gala opening in May 1935, singing on a London stage, knowing my family was in the stalls. To my dismay, they didn't recognise Helen or me sipping champagne (ginger ale) at a front table with our partners. When they finally realised it was us sitting on that vast stage they still couldn't believe it—as we looked a fright! We had bought rouge and lipstick that contained a lot of vermilion, which turned puce under the amber and blue lights during the Blue Danube Ballet. A switch of dyed red curls I had pinned to my own hair turned puce too, and the kiss curls I had stuck down on each side of my face with glue had melted with the heat from the footlights and stuck out like two horns. Kingsley Lark took us both aside afterwards and gave us make-up instructions, which really helped.

The six-week season passed all too quickly and we loved every minute of it. Mr Phillips lost a lot of money on the season, which was a great disappointment. He had speculated that London's tourists and visitors would support the opera

season during the Silver Jubilee celebrations for King George V and Queen Mary. But it was summer, and there were too many outdoor amusements for the public to attend instead. Most theatres suffered the same fate as the Lyceum.

I didn't see our singing partners again until many years later when I was in Australia and married. In 1957, J.C. Williamson Ltd presented the musical *Song of Norway*, the story of Edvard Greig's life. The baritone who played Greig was Charles Dorning. Charles remained in Australia and became a director of J.C. Williamson Ltd, later serving as their representative in London after Nevin Tait's death. Another coincidence happened when the D'Oyly Carte company came to Melbourne in 1979. The principal tenor, Meston Reid, brought me greetings and happy memories from his teacher, Stanley Young, in Aberdeen. Stanley was regarded as an excellent singing teacher and producer.

Before we returned home, Mr Phillips engaged Helen and me to join the permanent company, which was to open a tour of the provinces on 3 September 1935 at Hastings on the south coast of England. After six years of studying I graduated from the Academy, ready to commence my professional career as a member of the Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company. To celebrate the good news my father bought me a White's property basket as a present. I was very proud of it and it has travelled all over the world with me.

Carl Rosa was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1842. A brilliant violinist, he studied in Leipzig where he met the English pianist and composer Arthur Sullivan. Both were outstanding pupils at the Mendelssohn Conservatorium, a leading musical centre in Europe. Sullivan ingratiated himself with Rosa, who composed music every spare minute of the day, and, having the same interest, they became great friends. Sullivan persuaded Rosa to come to England, where he would be able to expand his talents as a composer and conductor. It didn't take long for the British public to recognise Rosa's genius, and his name became a household word. He was hailed as the number one impresario of opera. His greatest achievement was presenting four Wagner operas in one season in London. British composers like William Vincent Wallace and Michael William Balfe regarded him as their operatic grandfather. On a visit to America he fell in love and married a beautiful and talented English prima donna, Madame Euphrosyne Parepa. Returning to England in 1872 he presented her in concert in the provinces. Having already established himself as an entrepreneur, and encouraged by his wife's great success, Rosa formed his own company. Madame Rosa was the main attraction and she sang many important roles with the company that bore her husband's name until her death at the age of 37.

There is an interesting link between Carl Rosa and the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. W.S. Gilbert had had great success with his 'Bab Ballads', which he wrote for *Fun* magazine. Keen to turn one of his ballads, 'Trial by Jury', into an operetta, he contacted Carl Rosa whom he hoped would assist. Rosa was delighted to help—and his wife could star as the Plaintiff. But when tragedy struck and she died suddenly, he lost all heart and could not continue with the project. He returned the libretto to Gilbert. At Mr Richard D'Oyly Carte's suggestion, the

libretto was then given to Sullivan, who thought the story enchanting and agreed to write the music. Gilbert had collaborated with Sullivan on *Thespis* four years earlier. D'Oyly Carte was a successful business manager and entrepreneur who took over the management of the Royalty Theatre when *Trial* had its première on 25 March 1875. Arthur's brother, Frederick Sullivan, played the Learned Judge. The one-act opera ran for only forty minutes and played in between a farce and Offenbach's operetta, *La Périchole*. Had it not been for Carl Rosa's unfortunate loss, the famous Gilbert and Sullivan operas might never have been written.

When Mr and Mrs H.B. Phillips became the owners of the Carl Rosa Opera Company, it was an established company with an extensive repertoire of French, German and Italian operas, all sung in English. Success at the box office and sound financial management were paramount, as the company did not receive a subsidy. Before I joined, it was run by Mrs Phillips. The chorus regarded her as a bad omen, because under her management they often had to take less money or none at all when times were tough. This never happened under her husband's reign. It was Mr Phillips who arranged the company's operatic repertoire. *Carmen* and *Faust*, sung in English, were always good box office attractions and certain to fill the house at reasonable prices on Saturday nights. 'The Soldiers' Chorus' from *Faust* never failed to warrant several encores. *The Bohemian Girl* and *Die Fledermaus* with the Blue Danube Ballet packed the houses, recouping any financial losses made on lesser-known operas. Sometimes *Maritana* was a drawcard on Saturday nights, but it was regarded as an old-fashioned opera. Economy rather than extravagance was Mr Phillips' philosophy—the Carl Rosa had to survive at all costs and everyone had to be paid every week. Mat Byrne, a wily Irishman and business manager, never failed to pay our salaries regularly on Friday nights.

Many well-known artists came to give guest performances with the company. In the larger cities they were engaged to boost the box office. Thea Phillips and Eva Turner, both world-class prima donnas, and Florence Austral, the Australian-born soprano who was a magnificent Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, all sang with the Rosa. Another Australian, Joan Hammond, was a guest soloist during the Second World War, after I had left the company. The prima donna Helen Ogilvie was another excellent artist. Her Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* was beautifully sung and she made a most sympathetic Madame Butterfly. The tenor Jack Wright, also from Covent Garden, played Tannhäuser opposite her.

Another favourite guest artist was Luella Paikin, a coloratura soprano, noted for her Gilda in *Rigoletto*. Then there was Heddle Nash and Ben Williams, who had sung with Sir Thomas Beecham when he conducted the British National Opera Company at Covent Garden. Yet another guest artist was Parry Jones, remembered for his convincing performance as Canio in *Pagliacci*. He sobbed his way through 'On with the motley' and received thunderous applause at the finish. He was a short, stout Welshman who had a few crude habits before making his stage entrances. When I was a principal with the company, I sang Nedda to

his Canio. During the romantic scene, the last thing my lover Silvio (sung by George Hancock, a tall, handsome baritone) and I wanted to hear was Canio clearing his throat and spitting in the wings during our passionate embrace!

Mary Cadbury, whose husband was Major Cadbury, a chairman of Cadbury Chocolates, lived in Bristol and was a guest artist on a number of occasions when we visited that city. She sang Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*. I knew little about her career as a singer before she married, but she was a delightful Mimi, and all Bath and Bristol society attended her performances, dressed in their jewels and furs. Mr Phillips was all smiles at the bumper house, seeing every corner of the theatre decorated with flowers. Mrs Cadbury's two teenage sons were allowed to stand in the wings to give her encouragement. They were too busy watching their mother to notice me and Helen, two Scotties, standing beside them admiring her performance.

Many years later I met her son, Peter Cadbury, who happened to live close to Isla, my eldest daughter, in Hampshire, England. Peter was very interested to hear about my days with the Rosa, the company that his mother loved so much. After I returned to Australia, he found some old theatre photographs of his mother taken during a performance of *Carmen* in Bristol. When Isla saw one of them, she recognised me immediately. I was standing in the front row of the chorus in the Smugglers' Scene, holding onto my bundle of straw, getting ready to lie on the stage for nearly fifteen minutes listening to Carmen sing the Card Song that predicts her own death. No one noticed the packet of Smith's potato crisps I had hidden under my shawl to share with my fellow smugglers during the long wait! Peter sent me the photograph, which I now treasure.

The standard of the principals in the Rosa was extremely high. Pauline Maunder, Betty Thompson and Elena Danielli, along with Jack Wright and Kingsley Lark, made an excellent team in *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Another talented artist was Elsie Griffin, who sang the lyric soprano roles with the company. When I first met Elsie she was in her late thirties. She was a wonderful soubrette with an impish sense of humour, so vivacious and pretty, with her natural blond hair and blue eyes. Elsie resigned from the Rosa when the company went to South Africa, but we met many times again in London after we returned and before I came to Australia. Kingsley and Elsie were close friends, and he was a rival of her husband's, Ivan Menzies.

Ivan and Elsie met in the D'Oyly Carte Company at the Savoy Theatre when Elsie, eighteen years of age, was a star in the making, singing her way into everybody's hearts, including King George and Queen Mary, who frequently attended the theatre to hear her sing 'Poor wand'ring one'. An early recording of *The Pirates of Penzance*, made by His Master's Voice Recording Company, with Elsie singing the role of Mabel, was judged best disc in 1930.

'Faint heart never won fair lady'—and Ivan was determined to marry Elsie. He was understudying Henry Lytton when his big chance came and a second company was formed. When he was promoted to the comedic roles he plucked up the courage to propose to Elsie. During a season in Leeds, in 1923, they were

secretly married in Sheffield, a short train journey away, and far enough from the company to keep the news a secret.

Only their respective families were present at the wedding, which took place in the Sheffield Registry Office on 9 March 1923. The same day, after the reception, they had their first quarrel, standing at the ticket office at Sheffield Station. Married bliss was not to be found with the 'poor little man' Elsie had loved so much in *Ruddigore*. Her husband asked her to pay her own fare back to Leeds, which would have cost him 1/6d! Elsie felt humiliated and took umbrage. Once their marriage secret was out, it was quite usual for the company to watch them arguing in the wings, then walk on to the stage smiling sweetly at the audience, and then, once off stage, continue their heated quarrels backstage in the dressing room. Not even the arrival of a daughter, Mahala, three years later altered the situation. A strong resentment of each other finally ended in separation. A divorce should have followed, but neither of them took time off from their singing careers to arrange it.

Ivan and Elsie were two of the 'greats' in the Gilbert and Sullivan operas: Elsie with the D'Oyly Carte Company and Ivan in Australia and New Zealand. I have a very warm affection for both of them, because Elsie influenced my career in London and Ivan did the same in Australia when we were both with the J.C. Williamson Gilbert and Sullivan Company in 1940. His closest friends called him 'Jimmy' because of his initials JIM—James Ivan Menzies.

My first meeting with the Rosa wardrobe mistress, Mrs Graham, was during the *Fledermaus* season at the Lyceum Theatre. She sat on a large basket with a needle and thread in her hands, surrounded by many more baskets. The lids of the baskets were wide open, labelled 'Male' and 'Female'. Her instructions to new recruits were: 'Pull a dress out of that basket,' pointing to one, 'and if it fits you I'll iron it and put your name inside it.' I picked out a green silk taffeta ballgown with a bustle and a long train that had seen better days. It already had several names written at the neck in indelible ink, the most prominent of which was 'Audrey Mildmay'. Audrey had been a lyric soprano with the Rosa and had left the company to marry John Christie, who built Glyndebourne Opera House in East Sussex especially for her. To have my name written beside hers, even if it was only in ink, was an honour. All the costumes in the Rosa were well worn and smelled of dry cleaning fluid, but they looked fresh and clean to the audience.

For Act 2 in *Carmen* I had a beautiful olive green satin gown with a black beaded bodice (many of the beads were missing) and a tulle buckram skirt with a long frilled train, which I swished around in Spanish fashion, dancing in the Tavern Scene. No one saw the huge safety pins that held the bodice together under the Spanish shawl I had bargained for at the Caledonian Market. The effect was Spanish 'olé!' with a rose in my hair.

For the new production of *The Tales of Hoffmann*, which Kingsley Lark organised, Mr Phillips bought the entire wardrobe (Empire Period) from a musical that had flopped at Drury Lane Theatre. The men's costumes were white tights and short-waisted jackets, specially fitted for the tall chorus men

at Drury Lane. At the dress rehearsal none of the costumes fitted our small Welsh choristers. With their crotches down to their knees they were a sight to behold. The ladies' costumes were no better: they were high-waisted and made to fit girls with no bosoms! I was bursting out of my costume, lying on a bed of satin cushions with my partner in the Venetian Scene, trying to look seductive, when Kingsley shouted at me: 'Show your bosoms, for God's sake, and remove that bunch of roses you've stuffed down your neck! You are in a brothel, not a nunnery.' I thought no one would notice my modesty! Mrs Graham had enough on her hands altering the men's tights and left us to patch up our own costumes.

Kingsley was also an excellent character actor. One of his best roles was Mephistopheles in Gounod's *Faust*. He renamed Frances Martin, Helen and me 'Faith, Hope and Carrot'. He asked the three of us to look after an amateur contralto Mr Phillips had engaged from the Operatic Society to sing Martha (a small role) in *Faust* and gave us a small dressing room away from the rest of the chorus. Helen had played Martha and helped the young singer with her dress and make-up. She was dreadfully nervous and missed her first cue on stage. The prompter's voice could be heard at the back of the stalls, and Kingsley's big moment in the Garden Scene was ruined. The girl returned to the dressing room in floods of tears and we did everything we could to pacify her. All she wanted was to go home, so during the long ballet sequence we put her in a taxi and sent her home, quite forgetting that she had to sing in the Street Scene in Act 4. After Faust stabs Valentine and leaves him dying in Siébel's arms, Martha rushes on stage with some townspeople. A quartet follows. There was no Martha! We couldn't stop laughing all through Valentine's dying moments, knowing we were the culprits. We should have known better.

One of the trials of the young singer on tour is to find a good inexpensive coach. I was fortunate to have Charles Webber, the number one conductor in the Rosa. He was a naturalised British subject from Germany, and early in his career he had gained an excellent reputation for conducting Wagnerian operas in Britain and on the Continent. Charles was a great favourite with the company and an excellent singing coach. Most of his life he had been used to coaching first-class musicians. The Rosa orchestra consisted of eight permanent musicians who toured with the company, augmented by local players who were engaged for the season at the different theatres. Unfortunately it was not always possible to find good extra players equal to Webber's standard in every city. Often, at rehearsals and during a performance, he would groan in desperation and swear at the local recruits in German after many hours of practising, but with perseverance and a dry sense of humour he got the best out of them in the end. He blamed his ulcer on the incompetence of the wind instruments during *Tannhäuser* and *Aida*. During World War II, I kept in touch with him from Australia and sent him food parcels containing dried prunes, which he ate for his breakfast. He really appreciated them because they were unprocurable in Britain during rationing days.

Touring the provinces was one way of seeing England. Theatrical digs were cheap when three shared the expenses, generally amounting to 25/-



21 & 22: Two early roles: Adèle in *Die Fledermaus* and the Page in *Rigoletto*

each. On £3-0-0 per week, it was amazing how we managed. Helen Figgins sent 10/- home every week to her father. I spent mine. Before we moved on to our next digs, we would send the menu and shopping list ahead to our landlady so that when we arrived a good English dinner would be waiting for us: roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes, beans or peas, followed by apple pie, fruit salad and ice-cream. We certainly didn't starve. After the theatre at night, she would cook a late supper, generally baked beans or anything we requested. But there was one strict rule—no washing dirty clothes in the bath! Baths cost 1/- extra.

We were in Glasgow when the South African tour was announced, and, being two Scots in the company, Helen and I made headlines in the *Sunday Post*: 'Scots Carl Rosa Babies'.

Elsie resigned from the Rosa when it was certain that the company was engaged to tour South Africa. She was replaced by Maude Neilson, a Scottish coloratura soprano. Maude had sung at Covent Garden when she was only eighteen years of age. When her performance of Gilda in *Rigoletto* was a sensation, she received a standing ovation. Unfortunately, Maude strained her voice and wasn't allowed to utter a note for quite some time. After many years of studying she gradually regained it, though it had lost some of its former beauty and brilliance. Maude was in her late forties when she joined the Rosa. She was neither a soubrette nor a comedienne, but she was fanatical about trying to

regain the agility she had had in her voice when she was younger. She was not beautiful like Elsie and had a large mouthful of teeth.

Maude's London teacher gave her special exercises, which she carried out religiously, whether she was sitting in a restaurant or walking in the street. It didn't matter where. She didn't even mind if people laughed at her. She yawned with her mouth shut, which stretched her throat muscles and then opened her mouth, loosening her tongue, like a Maori doing the haka. It was a bit embarrassing to watch her, but she was so kind to me that I tolerated her eccentricities. She introduced me to her singing teacher in London, who called herself French, though she was actually an Australian, born in Melbourne of German parents. Her real name was Duret, but to the singing profession she was Madame Francesca Duret. In 1934, Duret had sung Adèle in *Die Fledermaus* with the Fuller Grand Opera Company during a season at the Apollo Theatre in Bourke Street, Melbourne.

I soon found out that the Duret Method involved stretching the vocal cords like a piece of elastic until they were thin in the middle. Demonstrating her top notes during a lesson, she sounded like the 5.00 pm train coming out of a tunnel! A few of her lower notes had disappeared altogether. To strengthen Maude's top notes, Madame made her sit on a golf ball (an onion was a good substitute) and imagine that she was pushing it through the chair while singing *forte*—a top C, D and E in alt. The result was a forced scream! Her method horrified me after the careful training I had had from Mr Harford, who taught me never to force the voice, but to let it float easily within its natural range and stay completely relaxed.

Finding the right singing teacher is like finding a piece of gold. A friend of mine from the Rosa, a wonderful artist and excellent comedian, Howell Glynn, a basso profundo, visited Australia with the Sadler's Wells' production of *The Merry Widow* in 1961, starring the indefatigable June Bronhill. He told me he had once been recommended to a teacher at the London College of Music. One lesson was enough! The teacher made him press his diaphragm hard against the wall, imagining he was pushing the wall down while he sang middle C down the scale an octave. His sense of humour won the day and he left!

It was in Johannesburg that I had my first chance to sing Adèle in *Die Fledermaus*. Maude Neilson taught me the role. I was literally thrown on stage without a rehearsal at a matinée half an hour before curtain rise. Although Maude had lost her voice, she stood in the wings beside the prompter to give me encouragement. Vocally I knew the part, but I often stumbled on the dialogue, and what I didn't remember I had to make up.

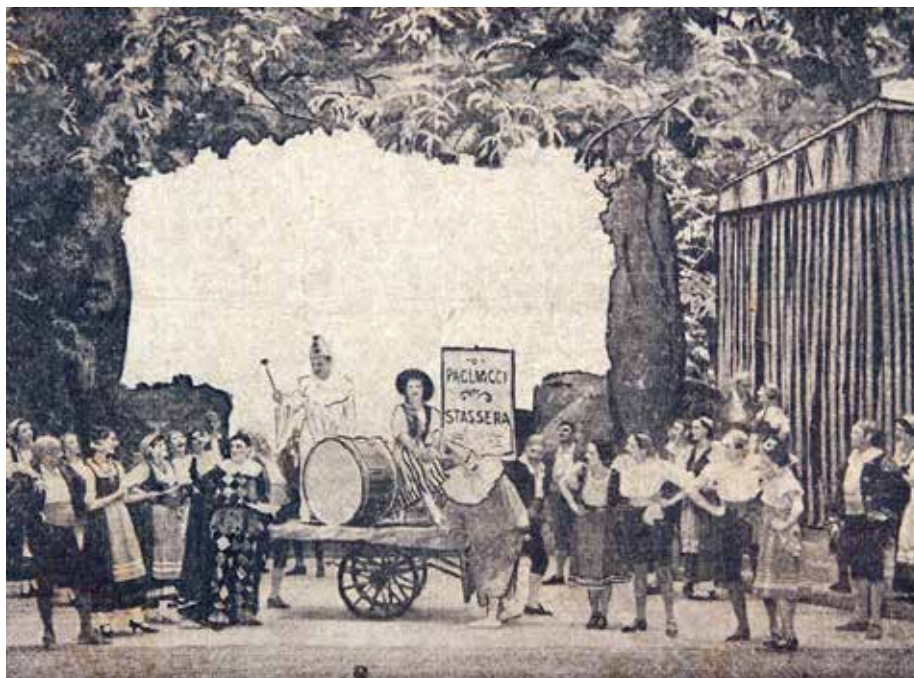
The tour included Bulawayo and Salisbury in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). We enjoyed perpetual sunshine and blue skies. Many of the theatres, which were cinemas, were so small backstage that the scenery and props had to be stacked outside overnight. It never rained, but one night a tropical tornado blew up, scattering the scenery from *Madame Butterfly* everywhere. Many parts of it were even found hanging in the treetops, but after hours of hard work by the backstage department repairing the damage, the curtain went up on time the next night. Such were the trials of touring. By the end of the tour I was a principal soprano.



23. *The Carl Rosa Opera Company in South Africa, 1937*



24. *Viola on the veranda of the Hopemill Hotel, Cape Town, 1937*



25. Viola (centre) as Nedda in *Pagliacci*, *Cape Times*, 19 July 1937

I sang many Adèles in South Africa—in Durban and Cape Town. Helen also played a number of principal roles. The tour was a success for both of us.

We sailed home first class on the Union-Castle luxury liner, the *Dunnottar Castle*, after a wonderful three months' touring. It was spring when we arrived back in England, and after a short break the company re-assembled in Bournemouth. *Die Fledermaus* was one of the popular operas in the company's repertoire and Adèle was my favourite part. I loved to watch the Blue Danube Ballet in the Ballroom Scene, sitting beside Dr Falke (Hubert Dunkerley), who was a past master at playing tricks on other members of the cast. He put salt in my ginger ale in the Do-e-do Scene. I generally got my own back on him.

I was more nervous than ever when we returned to Glasgow, having greater responsibilities to fulfil after our South African tour. I was cast to sing three principal roles and was paid 10/- extra for each part I played: Adèle, Nedda in *Pagliacci* and Micaëla in *Carmen*. I also had two 'snips' (small parts)—the Page in *Rigoletto* and Kate in *Butterfly*.

Engaging a baby boy for the part of Trouble in *Butterfly* had its problems. The education authorities didn't allow a child under twelve years of age to perform professionally. A small twelve-year-old girl or boy would be hired to crawl on the stage trying to look like a three-year-old, which often raised a few smiles. Once, in Nottingham, we had a dwarf playing Trouble. He smoked a cigar and spoke in a masculine voice. He looked very funny wearing a blond wig and kimono and waving an American flag.

Sometimes animals provided amusing moments during a performance. Alfio, a drover in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, makes a noisy entrance driving a horse and cart, followed by cheering choristers. The horse stands in harness while Alfio sings 'Gaily move the tramping horses'. Frightened by the glare of the footlights and the noise around him, the horse frequently misbehaved. A brush and pan were kept ready in the wings to sweep up any mess, but if the horse turned on the waterworks the chorus had to carry on without laughing and mop up afterwards.

The success of the South African tour added a new production to the repertoire, *The Gypsy Baron*, the English version of Johann Strauss's *Der Zigeunerbaron*—a comic opera set in Hungary. The work had never been done professionally in Britain before, and its première was given in Nottingham on 26 November 1938. It was an entirely new production, with costumes, sets and scenery specially designed for the occasion. Joseph Plaut, a buffo tenor from the Cologne Opera Company, directed. He knew the opera well and added some realistic touches to the production. Zsupan, a pig breeder, sung by Hubert Dunkerley, made his first entrance carrying a piglet under his arm. Under the headline 'Live Pig in "New" Opera', one review ran:

The Theatre Royal was packed last night for the premiere of Johann Strauss's comedy opera *Der Zigeunerbaron* by the Royal Carl Rosa Opera Company.

This was the first time an English translation of this opera has been presented by a professional company in this country.

There were no guest artists, the chief parts being played by the principals in the company ...

The libretto has been brought up to date and there are topical allusions to football pools and traffic lights ...

Vocally, John Torney as the Gypsy Baron and Pauline Maunder as Saffi, the gipsy he wood and wed, were outstanding. Among the other principals who distinguished themselves were Viola Hogg, as the pig-breeder's daughter.¹

Mr Phillips congratulated me on my success in Nottingham and Glasgow. He was pleased with the publicity, especially the *Nottingham Journal* criticisms. He generously offered me a raise in salary, from £6-0-0 to £8-0-0 a week, and gave me a new part to study—Musetta in *La Bohème*.

I was delighted, and very glad of the extra money for my coaching lessons. The following week, when I opened my pay envelope, Max Byrne, the treasurer, had only paid me £6-0-0. Thinking he had made a mistake I went into his office. He flew into a rage and said H.B. had left no instructions and £6-0-0 was all I was getting. I was too upset to argue with him and left, nursing my fury. I was not really discontented with the company, far from it. I loved it too much, but I felt I was being paid inadequately and had been unfairly treated. I had enough experience and technique to be regarded as a professional, but I still

1. *Nottingham Journal*, 11 March 1938, p. 7.

Friend's Advice Made Her Opera Principal

OPERA STAR FROM PAISLEY

People April 16 1938 Journal



"DIE FLEDERMAUS" AT THEATRE ROYAL

Great Performance by Viola
Hogg

Strauss's "Die Fledermaus," whose theme of marital infidelity and final reconciliation, although a trifle hackneyed, is nevertheless irresistible when set to attractive music and lyrics, was presented last night at the Theatre Royal by the Carl Rosa Company.

Honours went to Viola Hogg in the part of Adele, the minxish, ambitious, unscrupulous but exceedingly chic maid. Her singing and acting were both excellent throughout.

Ivor John, as Eisenstein, gave a good performance, bringing out in particular the subtle humour of his part.

An attractive diversion was a ballet, arranged by Doola Baker, which danced the Blue Danube with exquisite lightness and tenderness.

Strauss's delightfully lilting melodies were well interpreted by the orchestra, under Charles Webber.

To-night: "Der Zigeunerbaron" (Strauss).

YOUNG PAISLEY LADY IN OPERA.

Paisley folks are always proud to hear of the successes of their young women and young men. Many will read with gratification that Miss Viola Hogg, a townswoman, has been distinguishing herself as a member of the Carl Rosa Opera Company. After a six months' successful tour in South Africa, the famous Company have resumed performances in this country. They were at Haslings recently and the critic of the local weekly remarked:—

There are several newcomers, among whom Viola Hogg stands out conspicuously.

It was greatly due to the vivacious personality and telling soprano notes of this lady that the opening opera, "Die Fledermaus," moved along with an impetus which there was no resisting.

As the maid, Adele, she was pert, winsome and provoking in exactly the right proportions, while her humour was infectious at all times.

Miss Hogg was visiting Paisley a few weeks ago. On the South African tour, she foregathered with many friends of her Paisley kinsfolk and brought home their heartiest greetings. At Bulawayo, she was interested in a sign "Gleniffer Laundry." Entering the premises, Miss Hogg ascertained that the laundry with the Paisley name was run by a Paisley West-End, who gave her a very warm welcome indeed.

GLASGOW SINGER'S OPERA SUCCESS

Viola Hogg, a Glasgow singer, gave a distinguished performance in the Carl Rosa Opera Company's production of "Die Fledermaus" in the King's Theatre, Glasgow, last night.

In the coquettish role of Adele, Miss Hogg proved that she had considerable acting ability as well as a splendid voice.

The large audience enjoyed to the full the comedy of this Strauss opera, and the "Blue Danube" ballet was received with enthusiasm.

Outstanding performances in a versatile cast were given by George Hancock, Howell Glynn, Pauline Mander, Ivor John, and John Torney.

Charles Webber conducted.
To-night—"Tannhauser."

had a lot to learn. Perhaps it was time to find further opportunities in another sphere where my work would be noticed and the money better.

Just at the right moment, I received an offer from Rupert D'Oyly Carte to audition for him, with a view to being a principal soprano in his company for their American tour in 1939. I took the plunge and decided I would find out more about the Gilbert and Sullivan operas and the D'Oyly Carte Company. The best person to consult was Elsie Griffin.

Elsie was delighted at the news and offered to coach me for my audition. She was out of a job and undecided about her future. The announcement that her old friend Kingsley Lark and the prima ballerina Doola Baker were getting married had made her very unhappy. Their romance had blossomed during the South African tour after Elsie left the company. Though as it turned out, they soon separated and he married an Australian soprano.

Elsie and I met regularly at Weekes Studio in Hanover Street to rehearse, and often on wet dismal days Jimmy Menzies waited faithfully for us outside the studio to take us to tea at Liberty's in Regent Street. I found him amusing and entertaining. He told us what a wonderful country Australia was. In the Northern Territory he had bought a tropical coral island for £500, where he planned to establish a small colony for orphans and lost boys from the East End of London. He saw himself as a modern-day Robinson Crusoe. It all sounded so romantic, though the idea was very impractical, to say the least. That was before religion came into his life. Jimmy later joined the Oxford Group, better known as Moral Re-Armament, and this changed his outlook on life. He believed that his prayers were answered when he talked to God every day. He lived by four standards: honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Elsie distrusted religion and thought it was just another of his obsessions that wouldn't last, but after much deliberation she decided to follow his principles. Like a fairy-tale they lived happily ever after, and together they influenced people's lives in the Moral Re-Armament movement. I was too much like Celia in *Iolanthe*—the weakness in me was too strong to become an evangelist!²

I plucked up the courage to break the news to H.B. that I was leaving. He said he was disappointed, but as usual he was charming. He sent flowers and wished me luck on my last night. The happiest days of my career were with the Carl Rosa Opera Company.

Helen Roberts, an English soprano, joined the D'Oyly Carte Company at the same time as I did. She was a pupil of Spencer Clay in London. Some years before, when the Rosa was in Swansea, Wales, she came as a promising student to sing Nedda in *Pagliacci*, opposite Ivor John as Canio, for one performance only. I was singing in the chorus at the time. Anna Russell was another promising student who auditioned for the Carte Company, but she was turned down, which ended up being her good fortune. Anna became more successful than any of us with her clever parodies of the Gilbert and Sullivan and Wagnerian operas.

2. 'We know it's weakness, but the weakness is so strong!'; *Iolanthe*, Act 2.



27. Viola Wilson, 1939. Photo: Lucas-Pritchard, New York

Lucas-Pritchard

CHAPTER 7

The D'Oyly Carte Company

The D'Oyly Carte Company was an amazing contrast to the Rosa. It was 'Art for Carte's sake'. Mr Carte was more generous than Mr Phillips and paid me half salary to stand in the wings so that I could become familiar with the new roles I was going to play. Conscious of my Scottish accent, I brushed up on my English pronunciation with Marjorie Eyre, the principal soubrette, who had been with the company for many years. She brought to my attention certain words I mispronounced, like 'expeerience' for 'expiarience', and the 'h' in 'why' and 'wherefore', which should be silent. I still can't say 'expiarience' without thinking of Marjorie and her D'Oyly Carte accent.

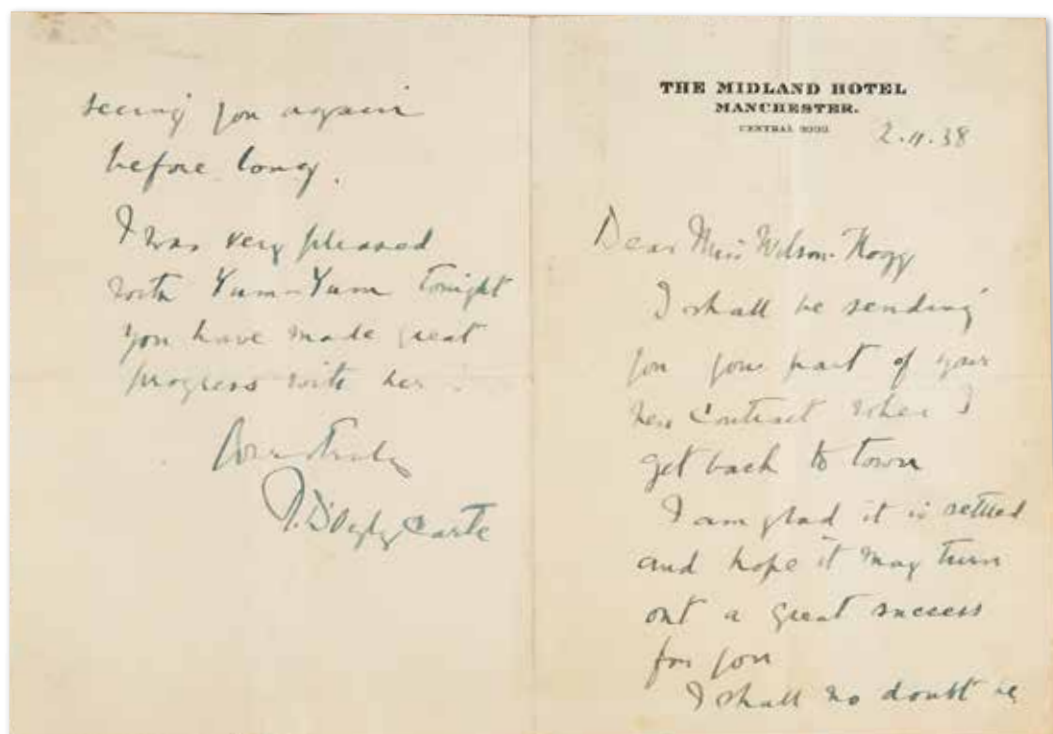
The other principals in the company were Martyn Green, Evelyn (Eve) Gardiner, Darrell Fancourt, Leslie Rands, John Dean, Richard Walker, Sydney Granville, whom everyone called 'Granny', and John Dudley, the Australian tenor.

Mr Rupert D'Oyly Carte was a man of slim build, softly spoken and a perfectionist where the operas were concerned. He attended many rehearsals at the Savoy Theatre and sat quietly in the stalls, criticising when it was necessary. He was like a god sitting on his throne.

In the London productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, I was fortunate to have as director James M. Gordon, who as a young man had been stage manager under W.S. Gilbert. He called the chorus together by announcing: 'Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please', as in Victorian days. Mr Gordon was a Scot of slight build, and lighter on his feet than I was. He kept his figure by living on whisky and fish. He taught me how to speak the dialogue in *Patience*, how to dance neatly with my tambours (small drums) as Phyllis in *Iolanthe*, and how to be an innocent and appealing Yum-Yum in *The Mikado*.

Mr Gordon watched every performance, either up on the electrician's ladder in the wings or sitting in the stalls. He knew the exact spot where each character should stand, and we dared not be half an inch out of place. He was demanding, but gentle in his criticism. From the stage, we could see his luminous pen jotting down notes that he later handed to us. Some of these I still have. They would read: 'You took three steps too close to Strephon during the duet,' 'Keep your arms steady during the song and sing with more feeling,' and so on. He worshipped Gilbert and, although a stickler for tradition, believed first and foremost in building up an intelligent performance and did not frown on the introduction of fresh ideas.

There was a certain feeling of grandeur walking through the Savoy Hotel going to rehearsals. Every room is named after the Savoy operas. We often listened to Geraldo and his Orchestra rehearsing in another room. They played dance music every night in the Ballroom. The Savoy Hotel was the place to see



28. A treasured letter from Rupert D'Oyly Carte, Manchester, 2 November 1938



29. Viola as Gianetta in *The Gondoliers*, 1938. Photo: Valentine, Hampstead, London



30. Viola with her father and a friend, photographed in front of a D'Oyly Carte poster advertising *The Gondoliers*

many interesting people, but not to eat, unless someone else was paying the bill! Lyons Corner House was more in my line. In between rehearsals I would spend many hours being fitted for my costumes, made to measure by a professional dressmaker at the D'Oyly Carte wardrobe store—something quite unheard of in the Rosa, where we were rarely fitted for anything.

On 19 August 1938, the company embarked on a provincial tour, starting at Bournemouth in the south of England where I had such happy memories of playing with the Carl Rosa. Once again I was on the road, with my theatre basket, suitcase, pitchpipe and the smell of greasepaint every night. Life was exciting. I made new friends, but never lost touch with my old ones in the Rosa.

My father joined me in Stratford-upon-Avon, where we played in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. He was in his element exploring his favourite playwright's country. He was my greatest fan.

After our first tour, we returned to London to spend the Christmas vacation with our respective families before leaving on 12 January 1939 for New York and the American tour. We travelled first class on the luxury Cunard liner *Franconia*. We made many friends on the ship. I remember well a Canadian businessman, Ned Gourlay, who was returning home through the States. He nicknamed Helen 'Cutie' and me 'Beauty' and delighted in offering us drinks at the bar and seeing us sparkle after one or two glasses. We were still far from being sophisticated. Ned remained in New York for a week and, being a keen Gilbert and Sullivan fan, shared with us the excitement of the opening night of *The Pirates of Penzance* on 5 February 1939.

Arriving in New York was thrilling. It was icy cold. There was snow under foot, but the sun was shining. The shops were booming. Broadway is exciting at any time, but especially when you see it for the first time at night. Night time was like daytime. I had never seen so many famous artists' names spelt out in flashing lights. Nightclubs were full to overflowing as though their patrons sensed they needed to make the most of life before war broke out to end their carefree existence. In 1939, the theatre district was at its peak.

In the midst of the glittering lights and excitement of Broadway, members of New York's Jewish population had gathered. They paraded the streets, holding out large sheets to catch donations from passing pedestrians or money thrown from nearby buildings. Many were crying aloud, moaning and sobbing, showing their genuine grief at families left behind in Hitler's Europe. There was nothing we could do but feel sorry for them. I was feeling sad too, having left my friends and family behind, but I knew that in three months' time, at the end of the tour, I would be back home.

The Company's principals were treated like film stars. Helen and I were overwhelmed. I was met by my New York cousins; Auntie Sara and her husband, James Steel, had already booked seats at the Martin Beck Theatre for the season. Neither Helen nor I were prepared for central heating, especially in the theatres and hotels. We soon found our British winter clothes were too heavy for indoors.

Miss Wilson - "Patience"
 Recit: End fell off ———
 Song - Shown - lacks grace.
 { and has to gabble end.
 "The 35 Dragoon Guards" - too placid.
 { all excitement.

Pat. & Bun: Scene. not happy
 { so over this.

Aug. & Pat: "Lady Angela" - No curtsey
 Recit "Long years" - started a stride to give
 { "He was a little boy" - action, and
 { stronger voice.

Speech after Aug. Exit. V. G.!

Act. Kept hands on hip much
 { too often, and too long.

Scene generally good, but don't
 { let voice drop.

Finale

Song. Quite good. But don't
 { curtsey after last "Exactly so"

Act II. Scene with Governor V. G.

"What is the matter" - "More in this."
 "It is my duty" always with a sigh. but don't drag
 "You can't live two. going a few steps to R.
 "yes I do. There was a happy - don't look at Bun.
 "Love to be pure" - long words - but drag it.

TEL: BATTERSEA, 0461.

40, Alfriston Road,

London, S.W.11.

Dec: 18th / 1938

Dear Miss Wilson

I did not have an opportunity of speaking to you last night.

I wish you all success in America and feel sure you will win it!

May I suggest, practise speaking the words, freely and naturally, in your musical numbers, as they are not quite clean yet in diction.

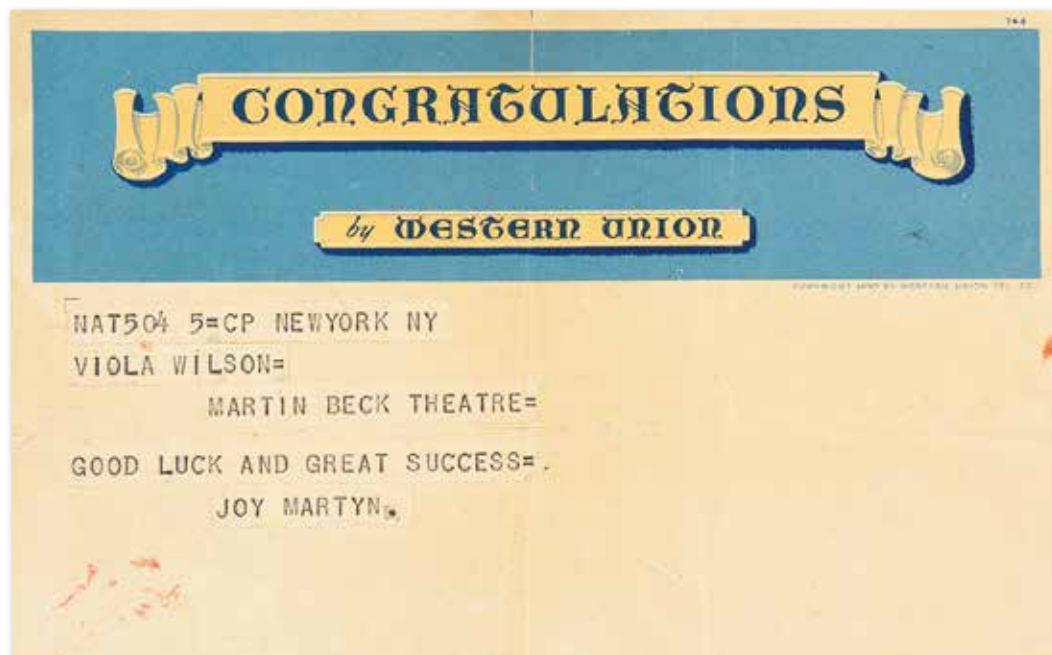
"Yum Yum", was very good, and Song, had a lot more personal element than previously, so I am sure you will not overlook Gilbert, and Sullivan - is assured, if you don't forget you have an Orchestra to get through in the concerted numbers.

Again wishing you a big Success. Yours Sincerely

J. M. Gordon



33. On board the *Franconia*, New York, 2 January 1939: (top) Anne Nicholson, Alan Warde, Maysie Dean, Brenda Thompson, Marjorie Appleton and Viola; (seated) Sydney Granville, Eve Gardiner, Martyn Green and Helen Roberts



34. Telegram from Martyn Green, New York, January 1939

Hundreds of Gilbert and Sullivan fans turned out for our gala opening. We opened with a double bill of *Trial by Jury* and *The Pirates of Penzance*. Many of the cast were old favourites with the public: Sydney Granville, Darrell Fancourt, and particularly Martyn Green, who could do no wrong in the eyes of his many fans, though some critics were not so enthusiastic about his antics. Evelyn Gardiner was warmly welcomed on her second visit to the States. The newcomer, Helen Roberts as Mabel, sang 'Poor wand'ring one' in *Pirates* and was an instant success. She received excellent notices: 'Radiant! Charming! Delightful! She brings an eloquent voice of great purity and some comic acting in the great arias.' My chance came the following night in *The Mikado* when I sang Yum-Yum. John Dudley was Nanki-Poo. I had something to live up to in Helen Roberts' success.

In America, English voices attract attention, and the D'Oyly Carte Company was considered to be the essence of English refinement and tradition. Martyn Green was a favourite with the press. Cameras clicked when he collected his mail at the stage door dressed in riding habit and wearing a monocle, just returned from a canter in Central Park. Evelyn Gardiner knew all the tricks to get publicity. She was an expert at classing pearls and diamonds, having learned the art in Paris. The publicity man had her photographed at Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue viewing pearls and admiring diamonds. Helen and I were invited to attend charity luncheons and were interviewed on the radio, which kept us very busy.

During our three months in New York I haunted the Metropolitan Opera House whenever I had a night off. It was almost impossible to get tickets that season as Lily Pons and Grace Moore, two well-known film stars, were singing there. As Mimi in *La Bohème*, Grace Moore was a sensation. She was also engaged to sing the title role in Charpentier's opera *Louise*, with Ezio Pinza playing her father. Both performances were sold out. Pinza was the first opera star to sing in musical comedy when he appeared in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, which opened on Broadway in 1949. These American artists made the Opera House pay as never before. Lily Pons, Beniamino Gigli, Lauritz Melchior, Richard Crooks, Jussi Björling and Lawrence Tibbett were among the many wonderful singers I heard at the Met.

I was always lucky enough to get a seat, and sometimes I didn't have to pay my own way to see one of the operas. Muriel 'Poppy' Dickson took me to a couple of them. She had been with the D'Oyly Carte during its 1930 tour of America and had stayed there to sing in Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball*. She introduced me to Gian Carlo Menotti, who took us to supper at the exclusive 21 Club. On another night, we met Grace Moore in her dressing room after a performance of *La Bohème*. She was charming to us. We were later shocked to hear of her death in an air crash not long after the end of the war.

Martin Beck, who owned the theatre that bore his name, was a New York identity, and the Broadway venue was always popular. I wouldn't know how many times he had been married, but when I met him he had a very charming



35. *Martyn Green preparing for the role of Ko-Ko in The Mikado*

wife called Martha. They lived in a luxurious apartment that occupied the whole floor of a building, with a lift opening into the apartment itself. Martha lived for many years after her husband, who died in 1940, and owned and managed the Martin Beck Theatre until her own death. When I was in New York after I was married she invited me to lunch at Sardi's, her favourite restaurant. She was a delightful lady.

Martin Beck appeared to be infatuated by my red hair. He came to the stage door every evening to ask if I was performing. He had a very strong foreign accent and called me 'Vee Ola'. If I wasn't playing he would leave. I was teased by all the other artists and called his favourite. One day he asked me to see him in his office. I was wary of being alone with him and a bit worried when he asked me to close the door. When I sat down, there was an

awkward silence, broken a few moments later when he leaned across his desk, his nose almost touching mine, and said, 'Vee Ola, I want you to do something for me!' 'Good gracious,' I thought, 'this is it.' Much to my relief he announced, 'I want you to cut your hair!' He explained that he didn't like the way I wore my hair, tied in a bun at the nape of my neck. 'It's too old fashioned and would be much more attractive flowing around your shoulders,' he said. Not knowing what to say I agreed to change it. Immediately he picked up the telephone and called the Waldorf and arranged an appointment for me with his wife's hairdresser. It was the most expensive haircut I have ever had!

As I got to know Martin Beck better, I realised how wrong I was to feel nervous meeting with him. He was every inch a gentleman. He invited me to his home for dinner one evening, before taking me to see *The Swing Mikado* at the New Yorker Theatre. The production was a swing version of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera, performed by an all-Negro cast. He wanted to see my reaction to it, especially to a black Yum-Yum. The company performing it was a jazz band group. They harmonised 'The moon and I', which was quite effective, and jitterbugged 'The flowers that bloom in the Spring'. It was nothing like the original, and to my mind the beep-e-a-doos did not enhance it. But the audience loved it and the performers were called on to give encore after encore. By the end we could hardly see them for the dust raised on the stage. Following *The*



36. Viola, 1939. Photo: Lucas-Pritchard, New York

Swing Mikado, another more lavish production, *The Hot Mikado*, was staged at the Broadhurst Theatre with the famous tap dancer Bill Robinson in the role of Ko-Ko. He strutted about the stage wearing a gold suit and a derby hat and sporting a cane. His rendition of 'Tit willow' was a sensation.

When all the theatres in New York were asked to send representatives to a big social gathering at the Astor Hotel, I was chosen to represent the D'Oyly Carte Company. I had never made a speech before and was nervous at the very thought of doing so. I wrote out a brief one, carefully choosing my words, and memorised it. I bought a new frock and hat for the occasion and went along to do my bit. There seemed to be a lot of Jewish women among those present and the party was swarming with theatrical and Hollywood talent, including Sam Jaffe, Jimmy Durante, Eddie Dowling, Sophie Tucker and Sylvia Sidney. They all made speeches that were heart-rending, so I concluded that the function was for a very worthy cause. The speech I had so painstakingly prepared went by the board as I spontaneously said 'Thank you very much for inviting me to this splendid gathering organised by women who are labouring for such a worthy cause.' I was later told that the function was in aid of the Jewish Women's Maternity League!

On another occasion, the principals of the company were invited to attend a supper at New York's famous Lambs Club. The club was generally 'male only' and our invitation was the first time that ladies were allowed to cross the threshold. We were each invited to sing. I chose one of Maria Ziegler's songs from *The Dancing Years*, which seemed to go down very well. I had bought a new evening gown and felt very confident wearing it. It was rather low cut in the front, which I hoped would appeal to some of the club members. We also sang quartets and trios from the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, which were enthusiastically applauded by the diners. It was a night I shall never forget.

With other members of the company I was invited to Billy Rose's famous nightclub, The Diamond Horseshoe, by none other than Fritzi Scheff, who had played Fifi in Victor Herbert's *Mlle Modiste* on Broadway in the 1910s and 1920s. With the passing of the years, Fritzi bore little resemblance to the Mademoiselle of her youth. Her dumpy figure was top heavy, she had dyed red hair and bulldog-like teeth. She was such a firm favourite, however, that it did not matter how she looked, and her act was a riot.

Our education would not have been complete without a visit to a 'French' nightclub. Evelyn Gardiner and I were escorted to one by 'Jumbo' Stanley, son of Lord Stanley, one-time Governor of Victoria. Jumbo was a Gilbert and Sullivan fan and had followed us from London to New York. He was at home in all the nightclubs, and when we entered this one a torch singer with flame-coloured hair and purple lipstick was singing 'I spent three weeks in bed with Major Burns'. Obviously no relation to the Scottish bard, Robbie Burns! It took me a while to work out what she (or he, I'm not sure) was singing about!

It was at the Rainbow Room, at the top of the Empire State Building, that I met Mary Martin for the first time. She was guest artist at the midnight cabaret

and sang 'My heart belongs to daddy' and 'Listen to the mocking bird', two of her most famous songs.

Our farewell night was exciting, with the usual banquet and flowers, but the thought of seeing my father again made up for the sorrow of leaving America. Betty Roberts and I comforted each other after such a wonderful tour. We returned to London, sailing from Boston on the *Franconia*, the same ship that had brought us to America.

Southampton sparkled as we berthed, surrounded by warships and army equipment. My family was there to meet me—my father and Isla, together with her husband Campbell, and their little daughter Morag. On my return to London, I stayed in Finsbury Park in theatrical digs owned by an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Ellis. They told me about a fortune-teller in the East End and intrigued me so much with her predictions that I could not resist paying her a visit.

I was hoping to hear her say that I would rise to great heights with my singing career in England. Instead, she told me she could see me on a ship, sailing to a distant land, further than I had ever been before. There I would marry a widower with three children and remain in his country to become better known than if I had stayed at home. I grudgingly paid her the fee of five shillings, thinking she had spoken a lot of nonsense. Not long after, I received a message from Nevin Tait inviting me to go to Australia.

In London, with my father, I saw many plays: Emlyn Williams and Sybil Thorndike in *The Corn is Green* and Diana Wynyard in Noël Coward's *Design for Living*. The musical at Drury Lane was *The Dancing Years* with Ivor Novello and Mary Ellis, and one of the funniest comedians was Cicely Courtneidge in *Under Your Hat*. Audiences were large and enthusiastic in spite of the fear that another war was imminent.

At the time, Britons felt they were sitting on the edge of a volcano. Because of the threat of war, many children were being evacuated to the country. My sister and her family had moved to Chingford, Essex, near Epping Forest, and I was staying with them when they decided to send their daughter to Scotland to stay with relatives. Anxious to see my aunts again, I accompanied Campbell and Morag when they drove to Scotland. It had to be a night trip as Campbell had to be back in London as soon as possible because of his duties as a medical officer with the St John's Ambulance.

We left at dusk. It was a depressing and terrifying trip. On the road we passed almost the entire British expeditionary forces—trucks and tanks—ominously rolling over the roads on their way to France, which greatly hampered the progress of private vehicles. We arrived at Paisley at 7.00 am to find our relatives eager to hear the latest war news from London. After a hurried breakfast we left on the return trip, which took even longer than the first as the troops were travelling in the same direction as we were. We reached London at midnight on 3 September 1939 and at 11.00 am the following morning the Prime Minister announced that we were at war with Germany. I remember it being a glorious day—the sun was shining and all the neighbours had gathered in the street to



37. *The Mikado*: Viola as Yum-Yum (centre), with Aileen Hines as Peep-Bo and Marjorie Eyre as Pitti-Sing



38. *Iolanthe*: Viola as Phyllis and Leslie Rands as Strephon



39. *The Gondoliers*: *Helen Roberts as Gianetta*



40. *The Gondoliers*: Eve Gardiner as the Duchess of Plaza Toro. Photo: Lucas-Pritchard, New York



41. *Patience*: Viola as *Patience*. Photo: Lucas-Pritchard, New York

NEW
YORK
U.S.A.

LAST TWO WEEKS FOR THE D'OYLY CARTE COMPANY



Leslie Rands as Captain Corean of the good ship "Pinafore."



Marilyn Green and Evelyn Gardiner as the Duke and Duchess of Plaza Toro in "The Gondoliers," one of the Gilbert and Sullivan works in the repertory of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company at the Marlin Beck Theatre. The engagement ends on Saturday, March 11.



...ley in "The Mikado."



Viola Wilson as Phyllis, the Arcadian shepherdess, in "Iolanthe."



'PATIENCE'

Viola Wilson has the title role in "Patience," the D'Oyly Carte presentation which will give an extra performance Friday afternoon, Mar. 3, at the Marlin Beck Theatre, for the Stagette Company Relief Fund.

...testy resolute ... burlesque, the slightest suggestion of a gag, would ruin the whole effect of the story of the Peer and the Peri, which has its gay spirit and its sly native but lacks the broad strokes and comic characters of the others.

Marilyn Green's Lord Chancellor, in this respect, was in marked contrast to some of his other characterizations, and was properly subdued although not lacking in humor.

Evelyn Gardiner brought authority, if not especially sensuous singing to the role of the Fairy Queen. Leslie Rands played Strephon with admirable finish of detail and individuality of style. Though Private Willis appears but briefly, Sydney Granville made the role count for its full value in comic dignity. Viola Wilson made a charming Phyllis, and Margerie Eyre was well cast as Iolanthe.

...and, since "Archibald the All-right" could not be wrong, the

...the latter was ... r. Green is in truth an actor. To have seen him so recently as the dandy and susceptible Chancellor "Iolanthe" and then to watch his dicing dandyism in "Patience" is really a theatrical experience to be

...And of course the rest of the able company is as ever completely a ... ny, as is the able conducting of ... dore Godfrey.

Miss Viola Wilson makes of Patience, the dairy maid, a winsome girl of naivety that is a feast for the eyes and an aural delight, while the dandy face of Evelyn Gardiner is a luxon creature, nay, "not pretty, massive," and withal a comely creature.

Leslie Rands as that "vasey Nar-joux" Archibald Grosvenor, distills the essence of stylism and self-sacrificing genius until freed of his accursed beauty by the Machiavellian plottings of Burthorne. Then



43. *Viola on her return to Scotland, 1939*



44. *Viola and her father, London, 1940*

discuss the news, when suddenly an air-raid siren was heard. Within two minutes the streets were empty.

When the siren sounded, Isla and I grabbed the dog, the cat and our gas masks and ran for cover under the staircase. For the next week there was a terrifying tension and nobody dared venture from their home, remaining within earshot of the radio to hear of any warnings of air raids. Gradually life returned to normal, or as normal as possible under the circumstances. Theatres had been ordered to close temporarily, so I sang at troop concerts at Drury Lane organised by Basil Dean, but the hazardous journey to Chingford by train in the blackout in the early hours of the morning was quite unnerving.

When I received the message that Mr Nevin Tait wanted to see me, my curiosity got me to the J.C. Williamson office in Panton Street as quickly as possible. Would I be interested in singing the principal soprano roles in Gilbert and Sullivan operas in Australia and New Zealand for two years? 'It's a beautiful country,' he told me. 'I often wish I could make my home there again with my family. You would enjoy it.' He offered me £20 a week and asked me to think it over. I told him I wanted to remain in London, that I would not consider taking a long voyage into the unknown for less than £30 a week, and did not want more than a year's contract. I gave him a 'take it or leave it' look as we shook hands, and on leaving felt that I had closed his door for the last time.

A week passed and then he phoned me with an offer of £25. But again I refused and, feeling the real businesswoman, replied firmly, 'I'm sorry, Mr Tait, £30 or nothing!' When I recounted this to Frank after I got to know him well, he laughed and said, 'Just as well you were dealing with 'Soft Jim'. I wouldn't have been so easy to manage.'

London had a fascination for me and, having travelled extensively for the past three years, I had made up my mind that I would never stay away for too long. The centre of the theatre world, it was full of glamour and excitement, and one only needed a spark of ambition and the right channels to be opened to find success behind the glittering footlights. I had had a taste of this and wanted to gain greater experience, to achieve fame and fortune right here in this city. To undertake such a long journey to Australia would have to be really worth my while. The few Australians I knew talked glowingly of their country, but preferred the excitement London had to offer. Certainly no one went to Australia just by chance. It was not on the way to anywhere and seemed like the end of the world to most people.

With these thoughts in mind, I felt in a happy position to bargain with Mr Tait. Finally he phoned to tell me he had a year's contract at £30 a week ready for me to sign. When I came away from his office the next day, I felt that if Mr Tait's brothers in Australia were as nice as he was, I would be in good hands. He told me that Evelyn Gardiner and four J.C. Williamson artists would be travelling in the *RMS Orontes* with me, to also take part in the Gilbert and Sullivan operas.

I had a few weeks in which to prepare for my departure. The thought of parting from my father, sister and aunts, especially in wartime, troubled me greatly, but I kept telling myself that a year would soon pass and surely the war would be over before too long. In the midst of my preparations I went to Scotland to farewell my aunts and found them terribly concerned about my decision. I cheered them up by promising to try to find their half-sister Kate, who had migrated with her husband to Australia many years previously. They had long since lost touch with her and we had a good old laugh at the thought of me trying to find little Auntie Kate in big Australia with no address to guide me.

Australia

Our departure date was 3 January 1940, and with the temperature near freezing point it was difficult to keep warm as we waited on the draughty platform at Waterloo Station. The other five members of my party were in the first-class compartment miles down the platform and I found myself alone in a crowded compartment at the rear of the train. Mr Nevin Tait was having a busy time running up and down the platform making sure we were all safely aboard with our belongings. This at least kept him from feeling the bitterness of that January day. After we had finally settled down, he and his secretary, Jack Rawlings, came to my carriage and presented me with a sheaf of flowers, their farewell gesture before the whistle blew. I had seen Jack clutching many sheaves in his arms earlier and could sense his relief when the last one was placed on my lap.

Good-byes had been said, and now it only remained for the train to slip quietly away—but it didn't. The passengers were all asked to alight. There was no reason given, just an announcement that the Admiralty would advise us later in the week when the train could leave. We knew that a number of merchant ships had been sunk in the past month and that the Germans were trying to cut off Britain's supplies and force her to surrender. But the U-boat menace had not worried us unduly, as we took it for granted that our ship would be convoyed into the safer waters of the Mediterranean. We realised our delay was a precautionary measure against departure dates being leaked to the Fifth Column and we knew that our survival depended on the silence of the Navy. So, without complaint, we all hurried back to our families and the warmth of cosy fires.

Later in the week we were again notified of a departure time and once again gathered for fond farewells. But, as before, our leaving was postponed. Gilbert and Sullivan had nothing on this situation, but it was far from amusing. Finally, a week later, when we at last got under way, I had run out of tears and it was almost a relief when the carriage door was closed and we waved good-bye for the last time. As the train slid out of the station, the last person I remember seeing was Mr Nevin Tait waving his homburg hat high in the air and no doubt as relieved as we were.

I was feeling very alone until I caught the eye of a young girl with red hair in the far corner of the carriage. We smiled at each other and I could hardly wait to talk to her. She looked as though she hadn't a care in the world—not like me, leaving all my loved ones behind and not knowing much about the country I was going to. On our arrival at Southampton, the red-haired girl asked me where I was going. 'To Australia for a year's visit,' I replied. 'Have you been there?' 'I'm Australian, from Melbourne, and I'm returning home on the *Orontes*,' she



45. Viola on board the *Orontes* bound for Australia, January 1940

said. It cheered me to learn that this girl, whom I liked immediately, was to be a fellow passenger. Arabelle Calder had been nursing in England for two years and was leaving the ship at Aden to stay with a friend.

It was a perfect day when we boarded the *Orontes* and everything seemed peaceful. It was difficult to believe that we were at war, despite the grim reminders in a barrage of balloons looking like baby elephants floating in space and the anti-aircraft guns perched near the ship's siren. 'We will never be bombed,' I thought, 'the Nazis wouldn't dare.' We crept out of Southampton in the dead of night, twisting our way through the Channel. We had no convoy. These, we were told, were reserved for ships carrying valuable cargo (as though we weren't!), and speed was our safety. Boat drill was a daily procedure and we were ordered to carry our life jackets everywhere. All male passengers were rostered to keep a look out for U-boats and had to maintain a twenty-four-hour watch.

For Evelyn Gardiner the trip was actually her honeymoon, as she had been married a few weeks earlier to Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Lister York. Her elderly mother, Mrs Griffin, was with them. For husband and mother it was their first trip to Australia, but Eve had been three times before when she toured in Gilbert and Sullivan operas. We had another honeymoon couple with us—Helen and John Fullard, who had also been married just before leaving London. Helen had been signed to play minor roles and sing in the

chorus. Also with us was Sara Gregory and her mother, both Australians from Adelaide. Sara, who was just twenty years of age, had been studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London and had always wanted to perform in Gilbert and Sullivan operas. She got her wish when Mr Nevin Tait engaged her for the soubrette roles. She and her mother were sharing a cabin next to mine and a warm friendship sprang up between us.

Sara and I were anxious to start our singing practice, but this was difficult as the only piano was in the lounge, where everyone hung around in agitated groups speculating on the U-boat menace. Not a very suitable atmosphere for rehearsing 'Three little maids from school', although the diversion would probably have been good for those passengers who could think of nothing but the dangers of war. So, we rehearsed in the confined space of our cabin, jumping up and down on the same bit of floor. Gianetta and Tessa from *The Gondoliers* also came to life in that cabin, and with the help of a pitchpipe we merrily sang the duets from the operas that would be produced in Australia.

Richard Watson was good company too. He was returning home to Australia after a number of years, having sung with the Covent Garden Opera Company. As grand opera was my first love, we had much in common and I found that we had mutual friends. Another passenger was the famous New Zealand-born Oscar Natzka, whose glorious bass voice had been compared to Chaliapin's. The mere mention of Gilbert and Sullivan brought forth guffaws of ridicule from him. This made us a little shy of practising in front of him on the rare occasions when we could use the lounge. We soon found, however, that he was prepared to enter into the fun of our rehearsal and even play the buffoon. He usually ended up impersonating Eve singing the part of the Duchess in *The Gondoliers*. Gradually, as we got into safer waters and could use the lounge for rehearsals, we discovered that we made a first-class company.

Our captain was determined to get to Gibraltar as quickly as possible, and when we reached it, what a welcome sight the famous rock was, standing out like a magnificent fortress in defiance of the enemy. We were not allowed to land, but while we were sheltering there briefly we took comfort in the many destroyers and cruisers surrounding us.

In Naples, our next port of call, the streets were full of Mussolini's soldiers swaggering along with plumes in their hats and guns on their hips. We spent the day sightseeing, and lunched outdoors in a typical Neapolitan restaurant, where the waiter sang 'O sole mio' to us while we ate our bowls of spaghetti. The *Orontes* was one of the last merchant ships to call there, as Italy declared war on the Allies soon after we arrived in Australia. When we reached Colombo, Eve and Richard invited me to join them on a visit to Kandy. I accepted, and was glad I did, because for the first time I was able to feel relaxed with Eve. Up until then I had been a little scared of her overpowering personality.

There is no possible doubt, she told me, that Australians love redheads. There is also no doubt they love good voices, and there is no possible doubt,

whatsoever, that Australia is the best place to live. She had no regrets about leaving England, and she and Richard intended to make Sydney their home. Her enthusiasm made me look forward, for the first time, to making Australia my home for the next twelve months.

And so the trip passed pleasantly and without mishap, and it was with a great feeling of relief that we at last reached Perth. Only a few more days and we would be in Melbourne! Even the turbulent waters of the Bight, after we left Adelaide, could not dampen our spirits.

Our last night on board was something to remember. Singing 'Waltzing Matilda', we crocoddiled around the lounge. Our exuberance must have penetrated the whole ship. Before going to bed, I laid out my new frock and hat and the silver fox fur I had extravagantly bought in London for this great adventure. I could hardly wait for the morning to get into my new outfit. When I did, though, I suddenly felt dreadfully overdressed, and the sight of the fur in the warm weather revolted me. But when the ship berthed and I went up on deck and saw Eve, I didn't feel too dressed up any more. There she was in a full-length Kolinsky fur coat, which must have weighed a ton and made her feel like she was in the African jungle.

The heat of the day was nothing compared to the warmth of the welcome awaiting us. John and Frank Tait and Claude Kingston, all directors of J.C. Williamson Ltd, were soon shaking our hands, and Mr Frank's blue eyes were sparkling as he told me he was Scottish too. They invited us to attend a late afternoon party at the office to meet some of the other executives and staff.

Meanwhile, Eve had attracted the attention of a taxi driver and everyone else's as well. In the end, she needed two taxis to get her numerous suitcases and hatboxes to Menzies' Hotel. No such palatial accommodation for Sara and me. We had decided to share digs and were not a little worried about our finances. They had been sadly depleted and we would not be drawing our salaries for about five weeks.

Tom Mitchell, J.C. Williamson's business manager, and Lou Parkes, their publicity man, had been instructed to help us find accommodation, and we had to tell them we wanted something very modest. Tom asked me if I was a 'wowsers'. 'Good Lord, no!' I replied. 'I would hate anyone to think I was mean. I just don't want to dig too deeply into my savings.' He laughed and asked, 'Don't you know what a wowsers is?' I had to admit I didn't and, in fact, had never heard the word before. This was not surprising, he said, as it was purely Australian; it meant a person who was puritanical, objecting to Sunday amusements, drinking in hotels and so forth. So, having established that we were not wowsers, it was decided that Sara and I should stay at the New Treasury Hotel in Spring Street, as it was near His Majesty's Theatre.

A familiar sight met us in the hotel lobby, stirring nostalgic memories of Gracie Fields—a huge aspidistra in a big Victorian bowl. And there, at the top of the stairs, were John and Helen Fullard, bubbling over with excitement as they had been given the bridal suite at a reduced rate. Our room overlooked a



46. Frank Tait, 1920s. Photo: Broothorn Studio, Melbourne



47. Charles Tait



48. E.J. Tait



49. John H. Tait



50. J. Nevin Tait

beautiful park, which we later knew to be the Treasury Gardens, and to have a shower at no extra charge was heaven after our London and Glasgow digs. We were anxious to see the theatre and explore the city. Walking down Collins Street, our eyes lit up when we saw Jonas' Fruit Shop. Never before had we seen such luscious fruit—pineapples as large as footballs and peaches like baseballs. They all looked too good to be real. Having been starved of fresh fruit for so long in England and on board the ship, we could hardly wait to buy some, but this did not prevent us standing outside the shop for a few minutes in admiration of the artistic display. We finally made our choice, and, hurrying to the park, ravenously ate one delicious piece of fruit after another.

Sitting on the lawn in those peaceful surroundings, we kept our eyes glued to the trees, fully expecting to see koalas or kookaburras coming down to join us. I had been told, by a leg-pulling Australian on the ship, that koalas were easy to catch and that I could have one as a pet in my dressing room. But where were the kangaroos and wallabies? And not an Aborigine in sight either! Was this really Australia? It could have been England, Ireland or Scotland, except for the intense heat, which was just about melting us.

Cable trams rattled up and down Bourke Street, the ding-dong of their bells enlivening the city. Such a change from our double-decker buses. We were tempted to take a ride on one. I looked at Sara's cute little face. Her hair festooned her pretty features in layers of jumpy curls that bobbed about as she nodded her head, and her *retroussé* nose almost vanished when she smiled and showed her perfect white teeth. She was an ideal soubrette for Gilbert and Sullivan. In contrast to Sara's curls, my red hair was screwed into a neat bun at the nape of my neck. I'd let it grow again, as long hair meant I didn't have to buy expensive wigs. Those from the theatre wardrobe were never very becoming and always looked lumpy and artificial.

Eve and Richard were already at His Majesty's Theatre when we got there, and were talking to an old friend, Jimmy Setchets, the stage-door keeper. He escorted us backstage. The chorus was rehearsing, but stopped when we appeared and the producer, Minnie Everett, came forward to greet us. Minnie was something of a legend. She had joined J.C. Williamson Ltd when she was fourteen, later becoming a *première danseuse* with the company and then ballet mistress in 1899. In 1909 she produced her first Gilbert and Sullivan opera, holding the honour of being the first woman producer of G. & S., and continued to produce G. & S. in Australia for the next thirty years.

We had heard reports that Minnie disliked imported artists and, if she didn't like you, could make your life a misery by constantly picking on you, but she was so charming and made us feel so welcome that we found this hard to believe. She introduced us to the company, to Horace Nightingale, the stage manager, whom everyone called 'Nightie', his assistant Len Gotting, who was also in the chorus and played understudy roles with the company, to Stephanie Guy, the pianist, Bernard Manning, another of the principals, and Gregory Stroud, whom we already knew. The chorus continued the rehearsal and I was amazed at the



51. Harald Bowden and actress Dorothy Brunton, photographed in 1953

quality of the voices. We had been told that to be a success in Australia you had to be able to sing well.

It was time to go to the directors' party. Sara and I had no difficulty finding the office as we could hear deep contralto tones floating down the narrow stairway. We nodded to each other, giggled, and in unison said, 'Eve's up there first!' The office fascinated me. I could hardly take my eyes off the walls covered with pictures of many famous artists. Galli-Curci smiled down from her frame and there was Harry Lauder swinging down the theatre aisle in his kilt. My father and I had seen him perform at the Alhambra in Glasgow and I was so occupied with nostalgic thoughts that I hardly noticed Mr Frank Tait approaching me. I had heard of Lauder's great success in Australia under J. & N. Tait management and I asked Mr Frank, 'Are you J.N. Tait?'

He smiled and replied, 'The J. stands for my elder brother, John, and the N. for my brother Nevin. My other brother, E.J.—Ted, who is in Sydney—and I are silent partners, but don't tell Ted that when you meet him.' He chuckled as he said this and I wondered why. We were all made to feel so much at home at this party, and the directors showed such confidence in the season ahead that I wished I had the voice of Melba, the feet of Pavlova and the artistry of Ruth Draper, all of whom had performed under their direction.

There were many amusing anecdotes about the five Tait brothers, which they never failed to enjoy. Each possessing different temperaments, they had their disagreements, but settled them in a quiet way behind closed doors. For example, a concert manager renamed the brothers 'Agi-Tait', 'Dic-Tait', 'Hesi-Tait', 'Irri-Tait' and 'Cogi-Tait'. In an article in *Smith's Weekly*, headed 'A tête-à-tête with Ted Tait', the writer attributes all these nicknames to E.J. Tait. Charles, who died in 1933 was 'Agi-Tait', and I think Frank was 'Hesi-Tait', although he never admitted it!¹

With a large staff on their payroll, John and Frank operated The Firm's business in offices over the Comedy Theatre in Exhibition Street, Melbourne. Claude Kingston, the concert manager, joined The Firm in 1922. Likewise,

1. *Smith's Weekly*, 31 July 1920, p. 2.

in Sydney, E.J., the chieftain of their clan, assisted by Harald Bowden, also a managing director, operated JCW's headquarters at Williamson House, next to the Theatre Royal in Castlereagh Street. For many years, Harald Bowden was the American representative in New York. Dorothy Stewart, the composer and musician from Sydney, replaced him in 1934, and all through the war years she sent many artists to Australia. Nevin was their London representative at Panton House in the Haymarket. They were a strong, enduring Scottish clan, and if an outsider offended one Tait they offended five.

Following our practice at Allan's Music House in Collins Street the next morning, I felt more confident to face up to our first rehearsal of *The Gondoliers*. Having played Gianetta with the D'Oyly Carte Company, I had taken it for granted that it would be my role in Australia. However, Minnie Everett told me to learn Casilda, as this was recognised as the leading soprano role in Australia.

On our arrival at the theatre, we were introduced to the Australian principals, Peggy Shea and Phyllis Curnow. Minnie took Sara aside and I wondered why my friend's face clouded over. She looked on the verge of tears. She had been told that Peggy Shea was to share the role of Tessa, the part Mr Nevin had engaged her to play when she saw him in London. To soften the blow, Minnie would allow her to sing it at the first rehearsal.

I had to sing a duet with the Australian Max Oldaker, whom I had met for the first time that morning. We linked arms as though we were old friends and became so absorbed in Sullivan's melodies that we seemed to forget all else, even the nervous tension we had felt when we saw Mr John, Mr Frank and Claude Kingston sitting up front.

I was looking forward to playing in *The Gondoliers* with Ivan Menzies, who had not yet arrived in Australia. For the next few weeks we had to rehearse without him. A veteran of Gilbert and Sullivan opera, Ivan was a firm favourite with the public in Australia and New Zealand, as loved by Gilbert and Sullivan fans in the Antipodes as Sir Henry Lytton was in London. Ivan Menzies' billing spoke for itself, his name being plastered all over the posters.

Richard D'Oyly Carte would not allow star billings. The operas, in his opinion, should be the attraction. Artists were listed in alphabetical order on his posters and this not only avoided dissension among them, but stressed the importance of team work. It also meant that when artists left the company, they were not so greatly missed by the public. If theatregoers had confidence in the company, they knew the operas would be up to standard. Many famous names are in the Gilbert and Sullivan hall of fame, and the greatest compliment an artist can be paid is to be told his or her performance was reminiscent of one of them.

We soon realised that Minnie Everett knew her job backwards. She gave to Australian audiences Gilbert and Sullivan productions that were sparkling and fresh and had enough tradition without being too rigid. The cachucha in *The Gondoliers*, for instance, was far from the restrained version danced by the Victorian ladies of Gilbert's day or the graceful and dignified interpretation of it in our London productions when we were never allowed to kick up our



52. Sara Gregory and Peggy Shea, 1940. Photo: The Advertiser, K Rischock

heels with an unladylike display of leg. But here, the gay and uninhibited performances brought many encores. Never was the cachucha so loudly applauded, however, than the night when Sara, dancing it with even more vim and vigour than usual, lost her petticoat, kicking it into the wings. It enveloped Nightie in a mass of ruffles and rocked the house!

Ivan Menzies had a habit of neglecting to wear his underwear, which was particularly noticeable in *The Gondoliers*, as he wore tights. It became so obvious that Minnie Everett had to draw his attention to his omission. Calling all the men onto the stage, she advised them that they had to wear their jock straps when dancing the gavotte, to which the quick-witted Len Gotting declared, 'Does that include me, as I only have a small part!'

Minnie Everett was a law unto herself. No one dared interfere. She hated any of us saying to her, 'Miss Everett, we did it this way in the D'Oyly Carte Company.' 'This is Australia and it doesn't matter what D'Oyly Carte did,' she would reply tartly. 'We could teach the English company a great deal, my gal. Your predecessor, Strella Wilson, sang the role beautifully and she did it my way.'

As rehearsals progressed, we grew to understand Minnie, but she certainly liked to see her Australian 'gals' doing well. She ran a dancing school and many of the company, particularly those in the ballet, had been chosen from her pupils. She also taught elocution, and if an artist needed coaching in dialogue she would give them lessons—generally for free. Many of the understudies sought tuition from her in the hope they would be given leading roles eventually.

E.J. Tait was against renewing Minnie Everett's contract, and also that of another ballet mistress, Minnie Hooper, in Sydney. He claimed they were both too preoccupied with their own dancing schools and were giving too many of their pupils first preference in The Firm's shows, whether their abilities were good, bad or indifferent. They were excluding more talented girls, and other theatrical companies were getting the pick of them.

Sara and I were anxious to know what roles we would be playing. I had hoped to have some of those I had sung overseas. Sara yearned for Phoebe in *The Yeomen of the Guard* and Pitti-Sing in *The Mikado*. We had heard on the grapevine that



53. Minnie Everett, c. 1940.
Photo: Athol Shmith

these parts had been given to Peggy Shea and Phyllis Curnow and that they had rehearsed them before our arrival. It was difficult to find out from Minnie, who was always elusive about it, so we consulted Eve. She immediately fanned our indignation by hoisting the British flag and booming: 'Something must be done about it or the operas will suffer. We imported artists must stick together. Minnie must not be allowed to get away with this!' We listened to the gossip until we could stand it no longer and I made up my mind to see Mr Frank. Surely he would explain why he had brought us from the other side of the world when he was not making full use of our talents.

Taking great pains with my appearance, I left the rehearsal for the Comedy Theatre one very hot afternoon, determined to see Mr Frank. He was out, and as I waited for him to return I rehearsed over and over again what I was going to say. Two hours later, when he returned, I had almost forgotten what I had come about. As he sat behind his massive desk, I told him what had been worrying Sara and me, and that I would like to play Yum-Yum in *The Mikado* instead of Mabel in *The Pirates of Penzance*. It didn't occur to me, as I later learned from him, that he thought the object of my visit was probably to ask for more money. When I had unburdened myself, he said,

Is that all you have come to see me about? For the moment, I want you to sing Mabel, as the part will suit you. Later, you will certainly play Yum-Yum. We have to use the young Australians to relieve the strain on your voice, as you have a very heavy programme ahead, so take the opportunity of resting when you can. You are under contract to sing eight times a week and you still draw your salary while resting. If you have any more worries, I will be glad to help you.

He was abrupt and to the point, and I felt I had achieved very little apart from getting the matter off my chest, though I did know definitely now that I would have to start learning the part of Mabel, which I had not sung before. It seemed there was nothing else for us to do but co-operate with Minnie.

It was a relief to leave that room and the strong light from the window shining on my face, flushed from the heat and embarrassed by the penetration of those blue eyes from behind horn-rimmed glasses. Mr John and Mr Frank kept a watchful eye on rehearsals. Instead of being in awe of them as we had been of Rupert D'Oyly Carte, Sara and I felt we needed their presence to give us inspiration as we sang into an empty dark theatre.

I was longing to see Sydney with its famous harbour and bridge. I was also anxious to find out, if I could, why there was such rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne—a rivalry similar to that between Glasgow and Edinburgh. We moved to Sydney for final rehearsals, for our opening night and for a three-month season. How different from the weekly stands in England, where we were always on the move, never given time for sightseeing, and having to be content with what little we saw in transit.

Sara and I found a furnished flat in Wylde Street, at the foot of Macleay Street, Potts Point, with a glimpse of the harbour if you put your head out of

the bathroom window. It was here we had our first experience of mosquitoes and they had their first juicy taste of us! We were just about eaten alive and looked as though we had measles until we were advised to burn incense coils to keep them at bay. In our ignorance, we placed them near the window and nearly set the flat on fire when the curtains caught alight one evening. We loved our little flat, although we were scarcely in it for anything but sleeping. This was just as well. Daily rehearsals prevented us from giving way to too much homesickness and worrying about our relatives at home as the war news grew more frightening. With many ships being sunk and with them our mail, we were hungry for news from our families. When their letters did come, they were censored. My father told me not to worry about anything at home. At the same time, his letters were alarming. British politics were in an uproar. Constant disappointments and disasters were shaking the faith of the people as the Nazis' ruthless plundering horrified the world. It was obvious that Chamberlain would have to restore faith in his government if he were to prevail. My father wrote: 'We look to Winston Churchill to save us from deadly peril.'



54. Viola and Sara in their Potts Point flat, Sydney, 1940. Photo: *The Sun Feature Bureau*

Sara had had a letter from her fiancé, who had joined the army and was about to leave for the Middle East. And so, while we were singing 'For the merriest fellows are we, tra la, tra la' in *The Gondoliers*, our hearts were heavy with worry for our loved ones under the cloud of invasion. Sydney was like pre-war days in London—no blackouts, no air-raid shelters, no sandbags littering the streets. Life was very pleasant in this beautiful country and we felt very fortunate indeed.

We liked the Theatre Royal in Sydney, probably because its old-world atmosphere reminded us so much of many English theatres. Eve and I shared the principal No. 1 dressing room, while Ivan Menzies had a similar room next door. Both opened onto the Green Room, which was comfortably furnished and had a piano. Where one dresses in the theatre is always of great importance to the artists—a mark of their seniority. Woe betide the stage manager who makes a mistake in this respect! It was rather a sore point with Eve that the leading soprano was regarded as the leading lady in Australia. After all, she had had many years' experience singing the leading contralto roles. To distinguish between the two, she was called 'Senior artist of fifteen



55. Carrie Moore, Sara Gregory, Viola Wilson and Phyllis Curnow, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 1940.
Photo: Consolidated Press

years' experience.' We respected her seniority and held her in high esteem for her perfection in singing the difficult contralto roles.

Dressing in the same room as Eve was an education, and there was never a dull moment. She was meticulous about her appearance and kept everyone on their toes doing things for her. Eve, who had been christened Enid Mary Griffin, was the niece of Sir Arthur Liberty, the founder of Liberty's of London. Her first husband, Major Goodchild, from whom she was divorced, had been in the same regiment as her second husband Richard. Her wedding ring, which was over 270 years old, had been worn by Richard's great-grandmother, Lady Mary Lascelles. Eve's stage career lasted forty years. She retired in 1960. Many young students benefited from her teaching, and she took a keen interest in the Gilbert and Sullivan Society in Sydney. She died in 1970, while on holiday in Hawaii.

I will always remember the excitement of our opening night in Sydney. As I peeped through the scenery and saw the elegantly dressed audience in the packed house, I felt a little nervous as I thought of everyone who depended on us. Opening nights are always a strain for those taking part in a new show and even worse for the management. Will the audience like us or will we be a flop? Will our weeks of hard work have been worthwhile? What will the papers say about us in the morning? Such were our thoughts as the dresser fussed over us on that opening night, 16 March 1940, before the curtain rose for *The Gondoliers*.

We danced our way through the streets of Venice to the sparkling tempos of the musical director, Andrew MacCunn, and it was not until we heard the applause and laughter resounding through the theatre that we could relax. After the final curtain, we knew we had been a success, especially when the three Tait brothers with beaming faces came to the dressing rooms to congratulate us. We were hugged and squeezed by E.J., while the more sedate John and Frank shook our hands. Taking me aside, Mr Frank invited me to a small party he and his brothers were giving at the Hotel Australia. He had already invited Eve and told me I could also ask Sara. Holding my arm, he looked at me appealingly, and with the other hand he straightened my Victorian bonnet, which his exuberant brother had disarranged. 'How long will you take to get ready?' he asked. I had to tell him that Gregory Stroud, who was



56. Viola with Ivan Menzies and Sara Gregory, Sydney Morning Herald, 14 March 1940

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Matinees every Wednesday, Saturday and Holidays.

playing Giuseppe, had invited Sara and me to a supper party and I could not possibly upset this arrangement.

The brothers had no sooner left than Eve sailed into me: 'You are very silly, Viola, to put Mr Frank off like that. It was an honour to be invited to meet the brothers' families and friends, and you may not get another chance like this. You can meet Greg's friends any time.' 'Taits or no Taits, I don't want to let Greg down,' I replied heatedly.

There was a knock at the door, and with face smeared with vanishing cream I half opened it and peeped out—right into Mr Frank's face. He had returned, determined to have his own way. 'I've just seen Greg and told him you and Sara are having supper with us,' he said. 'Do hurry and get ready!' Poor Greg, I thought, he will surely think I am crawling to the managing director and I would never want anyone to think that. Despite my guilty feeling about Greg, however, I enjoyed the supper party. So many of the friendly people I met had some claim to Scottish ancestry that I felt quite at home. Mr Frank told me he was returning to Melbourne the next day, but would be back in Sydney for the opening night of *The Pirates of Penzance* on 6 April.

Our first pay at the end of the first week of rehearsals had been like gathering gold, and to think we had this to look forward to at the end of each week gave us a great feeling of security. Kings Cross, with its little dress shops and restaurants, so like those in parts of London, I adored, and in between shopping, Sara and I would pop into one of the many little coffee shops. Back then, Kings Cross was not the cosmopolitan Mecca it is today. I found the Australian accent fascinating, especially that of the paperboys who shouted, 'Todi's pipers. Litest edition.' But my amusement would vanish when I saw the headlines. London had been bombed. I was terrified and imagined the worst. The black days that followed each blitz were a nightmare until I finally received reassuring news that my family was safe.

The war back home was a constant worry and my voice started to feel the strain. But there was nothing I could do except rest as much as possible and carry on. After all, I was not the only one with relatives in London. Many nights, too, Eve and I were exhausted after a strenuous day's rehearsals and had to rely



58. Max Oldaker, c.1940

on the efficient Andrew MacCunn to keep the sparkle in our voices up to pitch in the many quartets and trios in *The Gondoliers*.

One bright spot was working with Ivan Menzies. He never had to worry about his voice, which was as strong as a rock, and he had a remarkable sense of pitch. His wit was infectious and his clowning at rehearsals often had us in fits of laughter. When Eve was singing seriously, he would mimic her to perfection, sometimes causing her to fluff her lines. Her glaring eyes would show her disapproval as, sweeping past him into our dressing room, she muttered, 'That little man did it again.'

Something else that Eve disapproved of was having her understudy watch her. Many times the substitute would be seen with an eye glued to a hole in the scenery trying to catch a glimpse of the 'Senior artist' at work. Much of the hand-painted scenery was worn thin, so it was easy to make a small hole in the canvas to peep through, provided Nightie didn't catch you. The painted backdrops by George Upward were over forty years old. Many had been painted as far back as the turn of the century and were still very beautiful. We didn't realise how valuable they were.

Another great dislike of Eve's was choristers talking in the wings. Not even a whisper was allowed, and everyone had to tiptoe during performances. Eve's stage whispers constantly irritated Nightie, who would burst into her dressing room with adjectives flying in all directions as he reprimanded her. Her principal status did not deter him. We were all used to Nightie bullying us like a sergeant major, but we still respected him because he was always fair.

Eve's strong personality was felt throughout the theatre. It also made a big impact on the public during the appeals in Martin Place for 'Bundles for Britain'. There was no one better than Eve at making a heart-rending speech to raise funds for a worthy cause, and she was awarded an MBE for her achievements.

Frequent visits from Mr E.J. and Harald Bowden, the general manager, kept us in touch with the management. E.J. showed intense interest in our work, and his encouragement meant a lot to us. He would come to the theatre during rehearsals and stay to have a chat over a cup of tea. 'You did not know I was an actor once, did you?' he said to me one day. When I showed my surprise, he laughed. 'Yes, I was only seven and earned six shillings a week—a shilling a night after school with a travelling company, which visited Castlemaine. I little dreamt then that the theatre was to be my life, but that was the only time I have been guilty of acting—on the stage, that is.' And there was a twinkle in his eye as he added this.

Harald Bowden and his wife Effie arranged a party for the principals at their home one Sunday evening. It was a memorable occasion—my first sampling of hospitality in an Australian home, especially one in such a beautiful setting. Overlooking Sydney harbour and its illuminated bridge, the magnificence of it all made me wish my relatives at home could enjoy that scene instead of the miserable blackouts they were experiencing.

We were gradually making new friends, and among them were Hugh J. Ward, the well-known comedian and producer, and Arthur Allen, a wealthy retired solicitor, both of whom we were told had been directors of The Firm. Our dressing rooms became their rendezvous most matinée days, and at interval we listened to their gossip, much of which concerned the past history of J.C. Williamson Ltd. They often spoke about their association with Sir George Tallis, a former chairman, and gloated over the way they had 'put it over the Tait's'.

This made me curious, and I later learned that Sir George and Arthur, by jointly selling their J.C. Williamson Ltd shares to Sir John McKenzie of New Zealand, had given him control of the company. It was some time before I realised that the oft-repeated boast of Hugh and Arthur, that if they had the power again to run Williamson's they would do so more capably than the Tait's, was just so much hot air.

Arthur Allen was known to most as the man who drove around in an electric brougham²—a great novelty during the 1910s, as there were only two of them in Sydney. Hughie, as everyone called Ward, had such a comic face and such natural wit that I could well understand his reputation for turning any act into a riot. His greatest attribute, I was told, was that he did not have to rely on dirty jokes and vulgar expressions to get a laugh, and frowned on the use of them. We all enjoyed his many amusing stories, especially Sara and I. We had not heard any of them before, and our little gatherings often got so hilarious we had to be careful we did not miss our cues to return to the stage.

Hughie knew Gilbert and Sullivan operas fluently and was one of our best critics. His wife, Madame Grace Miller Ward, taught singing, and Gladys Moncrieff had been one of her pupils. We passed their house in Wylde Street on the way to our flat and would often stop and listen to the caterwauling sounds floating through the open window.

During the two world wars, Hughie did not spare himself in working for Australia's servicemen and women. In World War I his efforts brought great prestige to J.C. Williamson Ltd. For the first two years of World War II, as well as organising appeals, he arranged concerts for the forces, and, with other members of our Gilbert and Sullivan Company, I sang at several of these events while in Sydney. In one day's appeal Hughie collected £142,000. Shortly before his death, the serviceman's journal, *Reveille*, suggested that Hughie should be knighted in recognition of his outstanding work for the forces. But he died in 1941, aged 69, before this suggestion could be carried out.

My loyalty to The Firm made me want to delve into the stories I heard against the Tait brothers and find out, if I could, the true facts.³ Some of the criticism might have been deserved, but a lot was caused, I felt, by jealousy. Some said the Tait's were mean, but when I learned that they had been brought

2. For further information refer *Smith's Weekly*, 20 January 1940, p. 4.

3. The history of J. & N. Tait and J.C. Williamson Ltd was detailed in Viola's first book, *A Family of Brothers* (1971).

up the hard way, I realised why they considered every penny carefully. At the same time, I discovered that when it came to doing anything for a cause, they gave generously.

None of us had any reason to complain about the management, and any criticism fell on deaf ears. As long as The Firm was able to pay our salaries and we were not asked to work for art's sake only, it was all right. This had happened in the Carl Rosa Company before I joined it. For weeks during a slack period, salaries were cut to a bare minimum. Members of the chorus were paid half their normal wages and the remainder of the profits was divided among the principals. In the D'Oyly Carte Company, it had been a case of 'Art for Carte's sake'. I hoped it would never be a case of 'Empty plates for the Taits'.

After two months of continual singing, I was looking forward to a rest during *The Mikado*, although Yum-Yum was my favourite role. Mr Frank sent me a note asking me to accompany him to the opening night, 18 May, preceded by dinner at the Hotel Australia. I showed Eve the note. She had guessed something was in the air and advised me, 'Go, my dear. The Taits are sincere people and Frank is kind and considerate. His life was saddened when his wife died a couple of years ago after a long illness and when his only son died some years ago. Although he has three daughters, he's probably lonely for the company of someone like you.' Any thoughts I had of my charms attracting this lonely gentleman vanished.

I guessed it was just Eve's way of giving me the picture.

I chose a glamorous frock for my first date with Mr Frank. It was the one I had bought in New York at Saks and worn to the dinner at the Lambs Club. Mr Frank had booked a table in the corner of the dining room—'to be away from the draught,' he said. But I knew he wanted seclusion from inquisitive eyes. His rather sad expression gradually disappeared as we chatted happily and I found myself admiring everything about him. That he preferred Melbourne to Sydney was obvious. He told me he was looking forward to returning there for our shows and would do everything he could to make me feel at home. I found myself wondering how old he was. Eve would know and I could hardly wait to ask her. As we made our way to our seats in the stalls of the Theatre Royal, I could feel many eyes



59. Viola with Max Oldaker, Sydney, 1940.
Photo: Lance Studios, Sydney

July 25th, 1940.



HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE

PROPRIETORS: J. C. WILLIAMSON LTD.
MANAGING DIRECTORS:
E. J. TAIT, FRANK S. TAIT, JOHN H. TAIT
J. NEVIN TAIT (London).

COMMENCING SATURDAY, JULY 13, 1940

J. C. WILLIAMSON THEATRES
(by arrangement with R. D'OYLY CARTE) present
THEIR FAMOUS
GILBERT and SULLIVAN OPERA CO.
in
"THE GONDOLIERS"

The Duke of Plaza Toro Luis (His Attendant) Don Alhambra Del Bolero (Grand Inquisitor) Marco Palmieri Guiseppe Palmieri Antonio Palmieri Fancesco Giorgio Anniabile Ottavio The Duchess of Plaza Toro Casilda (Her Daughter) Gianetta Tessa Fiametta Vittoria Guillia Inez (the Foster-Mother)	IVAN MENZIES MAXWELL OLDAKER RICHARD WATSON JOHN FULLARD GREGORY STROUD VINCENT McMURRAY FRANK MARTIN CHESTER HARRIS LEN GOTTING GRAHAM JONES EVELYN GARDINER VIOLA WILSON PHYLLIS CURNOW SARA GREGORY ELVA BLAIR VERA EVANS VALERIE WALSH MARION DANIELLS
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Musical Director: LEO. PACKER

Opera produced by MINNIE EVERETT

[Programme continued overleaf]



61. Ivan Menzies as the Duke of Plaza Toro.
Photo: Athol Shmith



62. Sara Gregory as Tessa



63. The Gondoliers, Act 1, with Ivan Menzies (Duke), Evelyn Gardiner (Duchess), Richard Watson (Don Alhambra), Viola (Casilda) and Max Oldaker (Luis). Photo: Jean Stewart



64. Trial by Jury, with Sara Gregory as the Plaintiff and Vincent McMurray as the Defendant. Photo: Jean Stewart



65. The principal characters in The Pirates of Penzance, 1940–1942. Photos: S.J. Hood, Sydney



66. *The Yeomen of the Guard*, Act 2 finale, with John Fullard and Viola as Colonel Fairfax and Elsie Maynard.
Photo: Jean Stewart



67. Viola as Mabel in *The Pirates of Penzance*.
Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney



68. Viola as Elsie Maynard in *The Yeomen of the Guard*.
Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney



69. *Patience*, Act 2, with Viola in the title role and Gregory Stroud as Archibald Grosvenor. Photo: Jean Stewart



70. *Princess Ida*, Act 1 opening, with Gregory Stroud as Florian (centre). Photo: Jean Stewart



71. Ruddigore, Act 1, with Ivan Menzies as Robin Oakapple, Max Oldaker as Richard Dauntless and Viola as Rose Maybud



72. Viola as Princess Ida with John Fullard as Hilarion.
Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney



73. Viola as Phyllis in Iolanthe.
Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney

upon us and could imagine the comments being made. There was no secluded corner here, and I was hardly surprised when Mr E.J., who was sitting behind us, patted Mr Frank's shoulder, winked and asked with a grin, 'Had a good dinner?'

Sitting in the director's box and smiling down on us were my friends from the company—Max Oldaker and Frank Lasslett. Max had arrived looking more handsome than ever, dressed in full operatic regalia—top hat, opera cloak and silver-topped cane, reminding me of Mandrake the Magician.

As the final curtain fell, Mr Frank took my arm and said, 'I'd like you to play Yum-Yum in Melbourne.' I felt, 'This is indeed the icing on the cake—a perfect ending to a perfect evening.' There was no need for him to say this, as Phyllis Curnow had played the part delightfully, with Peggy Shea and Sara as the other two maids. They made a pretty trio.

The next opera to be produced was *Princess Ida*. The costumes were copied from the original designs used in the London production at the Savoy Theatre in 1884. In the story, King Gama and King Hildebrand are rival kings. King Gama's daughter, Princess Ida, shuts herself away in a women's college, where the boarders have renounced men. Eve played the head of the college, Lady Blanche, and I was Princess Ida. At the end of my poignant solo, 'I built upon a rock', Eve had to enter with her band of fighting women, carrying cudgels and picks on their shoulders, to support my challenge against men.

Before my entrance, at the first rehearsal, I had watched Eve being dressed in her elaborate armour and heard her 'oohing' and 'aahing' as the dresser, with shaking fingers, was trying to screw her into a 'Ned Kelly' suit. Eve was screaming 'I can't move', and complaining loudly to Nightie, who could not leave his post in the prompt corner, while Andrew MacCunn, greatly distressed at the noise, was yelling 'Quiet' from the pit. Suddenly, while I was singing, there was a loud bang accompanied by moans and groans. I couldn't go on—I had to stop and see what it was all about. There was poor Eve in dire distress, lying on the floor helpless, perspiration pouring from her face as those who had rushed to her aid were trying to liberate her. Someone tried to lift her up. 'Get a crane,' said Len Gotting facetiously. It was minutes, which must have seemed like hours to Eve, before we had her unscrewed from the armour and got her on her feet, speechless for once with shock. The dresser had not fitted the armour correctly on her legs, almost locking them together. Needless to say, Eve made quite sure there were no mistakes the next time she had to wear the armour!

Nightie was one of the most efficient stage managers in Australia. Little escaped his eagle eye. For instance, if any of the girls had an ordinary pin in her head dress, he would pull it out and send her back to the dressing room because it reflected the light. Eve found him difficult and bad-tempered but had to admit he ran the company like clockwork and was wonderful in a crisis. There was always something dramatic happening to Eve that Nightie had to attend to—the breaking of a rib or the spraining of an ankle.

The season seemed endless as each opera was produced. My repertoire had grown, but it had meant hard work. Rehearsing during the day and performing

every night was by no means easy and a strain on the vocal cords. The only free day we had was Sunday, when we were able to relax—but not for long, as we were asked to sing at the troop camps.

When the Sydney season finally finished, we returned to Melbourne. We opened the season there on 13 July with *The Gondoliers*, followed by six other Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Sara and I found accommodation at The Belmont, a private hotel in East Melbourne overlooking the Fitzroy Gardens, through which we enjoyed many pleasant walks to the theatre.

Every Saturday night at His Majesty's I would see the same distinguished-looking couple in the front row of the dress circle. I asked Mr Frank who they were and he told me, 'That's Sir Robert Best, our solicitor and good friend, and Lady Best.' Sometimes they brought their daughter Roberta with them. Another ardent Gilbert and Sullivan fan, who came backstage to meet the cast, was Robert Menzies, then Prime Minister of Australia for the first time. He and his wife Patti were photographed with Ivan Menzies, while the rest of us stood aside and made appropriate remarks about the meeting of the Menzies clan.

The Pirates of Penzance, one of Mr Frank's favourite operas, followed *The Gondoliers* on 3 August. During rehearsals, while Max Oldaker and I were singing 'Ah, leave me not to pine alone and desolate', I began to notice that Mr Frank would come through the door on the prompt side of the stalls and remain there until we had finished the duet. At first I thought it a coincidence, but over and over again he arrived at the same time. I began to look for the door to open and, when it did, I found myself singing with such feeling that even my old teacher, Mr Harford, would have been delighted. One night Max said, 'Viola, you sang that beautifully. Was it for me?'

Frank spent his evenings between His Majesty's and the King's Theatre in Russell Street. If he was unable to come to His Majesty's, I would get a note from him. I realised that he was relying on seeing me often. Eve was almost as intrigued as I was, and the whole company was saying it was obvious why Mr Frank was 'hanging around the stage door'. I laughed this off, using the hackneyed phrase, 'We are just good friends.'

Then, on Sundays, after Frank had played his usual round of golf, we were together regularly. Frank and his brothers were keen golfers and, if possible, played a mid-week game as well. It gave them the relaxation they needed after spending fourteen hours most days in the theatre. E.J. was the keenest of them all, and if ever he was in England during the summer he would be found on the links until 10.00 pm, taking advantage of the long twilight. Frank often chuckled over the time he was playing a foursome at the Metropolitan links in Melbourne with his brothers John and E.J., and George Allan, of Allan's Music Warehouse. It was during the 'flu epidemic after the First World War, when most of the usual caddies were away ill and one of the temporary caddies was allotted to George. Playing worse than usual, George turned to his caddy and asked, 'Have you ever seen anyone play such a bad game?' 'Don't know, sir,' was the reply, 'but they say a bloke here named Allan's the world's worst!'

After golf, Frank would meet me on Sundays at the Collins Street rooms of Granville Dunstan, who had asked if he could paint my portrait as Josephine in *HMS Pinafore*. I usually sat for him on Sunday mornings. ‘Granny’, as he was popularly known, was a radiologist and several of his patients were from our company. He was following my romance with Frank with impish interest. He never got much out of me, but Eve and Sara kept him up to date with the latest gossip when I was not there.

During the last sitting for my portrait, Granny said, ‘The big boss is coming up this morning to have a look at your picture. He wants to buy it, but don’t let on I told you.’ He chuckled and rubbed his hands together, indicating that he had made a good transaction. I hardly had time to recover from this surprise when Mr Frank arrived.

At Menzies’ Hotel, having lunch, Frank told me he liked the portrait and wanted me to accept it as a present. Any doubts I had about being just another soprano in his company vanished completely. I felt he was about to reveal to me what was in his heart—when the spell was broken by a voice behind us: ‘Hello, Nunks, what a surprise to see you here!’ Cecil Tait, one of Charlie’s daughters, had been lunching at the next table and was apparently watching our *tête-à-tête*. That Frank’s intentions were serious was confirmed a few days later.

Noël Coward had been entertaining troops in the Middle East and was spending a few days in Australia before returning to England. He appeared in Melbourne at a charity matinée on 29 November 1940 in aid of the Red Cross, and in the presence of Her Excellency Lady Dugan. The Gilbert and Sullivan Company contributed items. Max Oldaker and I opened the programme with the duet ‘I’ll see you again’ from Coward’s *Bitter Sweet*, and were pleased to note the composer’s approval. The programme also featured Coward’s one-act play *Ways and Means* from *Tonight* at 8.30. Alec Coppel produced the play, which featured Marie Ney and Hal Thompson. The master himself closed the matinée with selections from his extensive repertoire. It was a momentous occasion and the audience encored Coward many times and he generously responded.

After the matinée, I was coming from the dressing room when I saw Frank on the stage surrounded by people. He came over, took my arm and said, ‘I would like you to meet my family.’ He introduced me to his daughters Peggy and Ruth, his sister Amy, and Charlie’s other daughter Gwen Forbes, and I found myself wondering if they had any idea about our friendship.

A few nights later we were performing *Pinafore*. To my surprise, I saw Ned Gourlay smiling up at me from the front row of the stalls. The last time I had seen him was in New York when I had developed quite a crush on him. At interval he sent a note backstage, asking Eve and me to have supper with him, and we found him as charming and flirtatious as he had been when we first met him on the *Franconia*. He invited me to a cocktail party on the Wednesday and would take no excuses. He would call for me after the matinée, he said, and get me back in time for the evening performance. Frank had gone to Sydney and I wasn’t sure when he was returning. I wondered how I would have overcome

the situation had he been in Melbourne. Eve kept warning me, 'Now, Viola, Ned's a married man.' It was obvious she didn't want us to be alone.

A bad cold developing into laryngitis almost settled the matter for me, and it's a wonder it didn't finish my friendship with Frank. At Wednesday's matinée I struggled through my two long arias and felt exhausted as I left the stage. To my surprise, Frank was waiting for me. Taking my hand, he said tenderly, 'I'm very worried about your voice. I will drive you home. Promise me you'll go straight to bed and rest as much as you can.' I couldn't very well tell him I was going to a cocktail party. I had bought a new hat for it that morning. I felt torn between the devil and the deep blue sea. Or was it those deep blue eyes?

On my way home, Frank stopped at the chemist's shop to buy medicine for me. As we parted on the steps of The Belmont, again I felt a heel as he put the medicine in my hand and said, 'Look after yourself. I'll inquire in the morning.' I rushed in and phoned Ned to tell him I wasn't well enough to keep our date, but he wouldn't listen to my protestations. What could I do? After all, I was longing to wear that new hat, and perhaps it wouldn't be so wrong if I went? Ned announced his arrival with a loud bang on the door. He had brought a large spray of orchids, pinned it on my coat, almost lifted me off my feet and swept me down the stairs. As he shut the door behind us, who should appear but Frank! I froze with embarrassment. Then I meekly went up to his car, noting with further distress a large sheaf of flowers on the seat, and said, 'I'm only going out for a while.' His dejected look, as he scanned my handsome escort, did not help matters. Giving me the flowers, he simply replied, 'I'll be in touch with you tomorrow.' Throughout the party, my thoughts were on my kind employer, and Ned kept questioning and teasing me about 'My Mr Frank'. Ned took me to dinner at the Riverside Inn, a quaint Tudor-style restaurant on the Yarra River, and I never pass there now without thinking of that awkward night. After Ned dropped me back at The Belmont, I phoned Frank and apologised. I was relieved and pleased when he asked if he could call on his way home from the King's Theatre. That night, he asked me to drop the formality of calling him Mr Frank, and that, I think, was the beginning of our romance.

Having to attend late rehearsals at the Comedy Theatre and keep a watchful eye on the overtime sheet enabled Frank to drive me home most nights. We would have supper on the way, but finding a place without meeting someone who knew Frank was not easy. One evening we stopped at The Jolly Roger in St Kilda Road, surely far enough away from the theatre crowd to ensure privacy. But just as we took the only two vacant seats, a low deep voice across the table said, 'Haven't seen you here before, Mr Tait.' It was the radio personality John Masters, who had married Frank's eldest daughter Joan. We finished supper as quickly as we could, and then laughed over the incident as we went to the car. What was the use of pretending any longer? The time had come for us to be open about our romance. Nothing else mattered but the love we had for each other. In the Oldsmobile outside The Belmont, Frank asked me to marry him and I let him know I returned the love he had for me. We sat there, discussing our future



74. Granville Dunstan's 1940 painting of Viola as Josephine in HMS Pinafore



75. HMS Pinafore, Act 1 finale, Viola as Josephine (centre). Photo: Jean Stewart



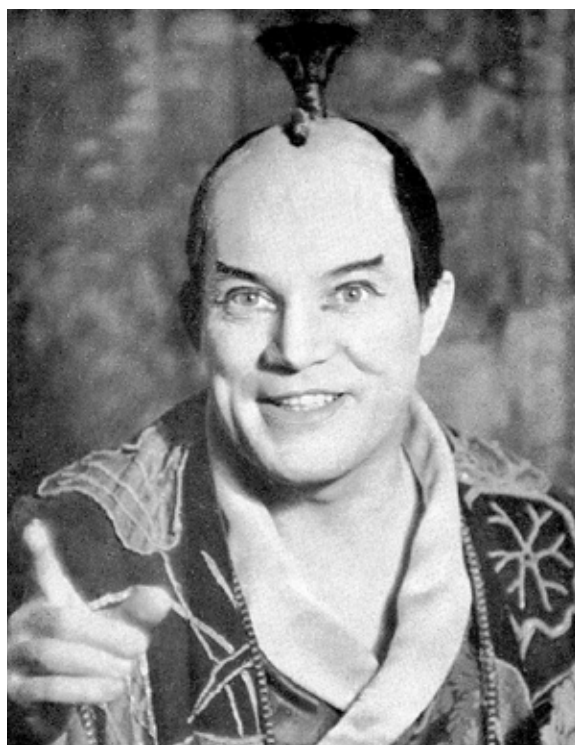
76. Viola as Josephine, as she appears in Act 1.
Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney



77. Viola as Josephine, wearing her Act 2 costume.
Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney



78. *The Mikado: Three Little Maids*; Sara Gregory (Peep-Bo), Viola Wilson (Yum-Yum) and Peggy Shea (Pitti-Sing). Photo: Sun-Pictorial



79. Ivan Menzies as Ko-Ko



80. Evelyn Gardiner as Katisha. Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney



81. Bernard Manning as the Mikado of Japan



82. Viola as Yum-Yum



83. *The Sorcerer*: Viola as Aline



84. *The Sorcerer*: Sara Gregory as Constance

plans until the small hours. A New Zealand tour lay ahead, and many problems had to be ironed out before we could announce our engagement. We decided to wait until after the tour before doing so. Frank told me he was fifty-six in such a way that I realised the difference in our ages had been worrying him. I reassured him. Time was precious and every moment in our lives counted.

And so my year's contract with The Firm was to become a life contract with the managing director. I was so excited I didn't sleep that night, and Frank's head must have been well in the clouds too. As he entered the gate of his home in Hopetoun Road, Toorak, he ran his car into a post. It was certainly not the effect of anything we had had at The Jolly Roger!

I had never been in love before, discounting, of course, the growing-up romances every young girl experiences. When I was twenty, I thought I was in love with Duncan Morison. Then Sydney MacEwan nearly stole my affections, and I was heartbroken when I discovered that, after many months of deep friendship, Duncan did not seem to mind my flirtations with the handsome Sydney. I believed Duncan was too shy to even kiss me, and when he missed many golden opportunities I decided he had too much respect for me to make advances. Our mutual friends told me he was wedded to his art.

I had vowed I would never fall in love again, and now here I was in Melbourne, 12,000 miles from home, in love with Frank Samuel Tait! My thoughts returned to the fortune-teller in London. The hand of fate was gradually leading me along a path that, had I known the answer then, I would gladly walk again.

As the first Tuesday in November approached, Melbourne Cup fever mounted. It was contagious, and the company hoped there would be no *matinée*. If the day was wet, the theatres would be crowded; but if it was fine, people would flock to outdoor pleasures. Melbourne's weather was unpredictable, and betting on it was as big a gamble as trying to pick the winner of the Cup. Frank's desire to take me to Flemington racecourse settled the matter, to everyone's delight.

It was incredible to me that a race meeting should be the occasion for a public holiday, but I was told businesses may as well close down for the day, as little or no work would be done if they remained open, such was the Cup's grip on the public. It was Australia's greatest race, and the one day of the year on which even non-racegoers could not resist having a bet.

Allan and Ethel McKay, friends of Frank's, invited us to a chicken and champagne lunch served from their car in the members' parking area, where luncheon parties were almost as big a feature of the day as the racing. Little did Allan realise, as we drank each other's health in champagne, that he would be drinking champagne at our wedding in a few months' time and that he would be our best man.

I was depending on Frank to give me some winners, but found he was expecting me to bring him Scottish luck. 'Pick the winner of the Cup,' he said. 'Old Rowley's my bet,' I replied without knowing why. 'Not that old nag, surely,' he said. 'That's a dud horse if ever there was one and I won't let you throw your

money away on it' It had to be some other horse, and I looked for one with a Scottish or musical name. How else was I to pick the winner?

We were impatient for the big race to start and it seemed the starters would never get the many horses into position. Then, a buzz of excitement and the cry went up: 'They're off!' and I found myself joining in the shouting with thousands of others as though urging would bring the favourites to the fore. Even as they thundered up the straight for the last few furlongs of the two-mile race it was impossible to tell which of the horses bunched together was likely to win. We were all jumping up and down like two-year-olds and the shouting grew even more deafening.

As the horses neared the winning post, I heard cries of 'Old Rowley' and then Frank's 'Oh no, not Old Rowley' as he turned to me in despair. I could not show my disappointment too much as I knew how he must be feeling. He was even more downcast later when we found out Old Rowley had started at 100 to 1!

I had to sing in the show that night. It was a wonder I had any voice left. All I could think of was how I'd nearly backed the winner of my first Melbourne Cup.

While we were in Melbourne, Alec Coppel, an Australian who had spent many years in London, returned to direct *Ladies in Retirement* at the Comedy Theatre. Marie Ney, who was starring in it, had had a long association with the Tait brothers prior to her début in London in 1923, having been in the original cast of J. & N. Tait's *Peg o' My Heart* in 1916.



85. Viola at the races, c. 1940. Photo: Herald Feature Service

Coppel had become very English in his methods, and after Frank had attended a few rehearsals he described them to me as 'Rather precious and very uttahn typical of the delicious delicate touch with which English producers handle their stars.' The time and energy wasted at these rehearsals infuriated him. Over and over again would be heard a drawling voice: 'Duck-ay dahling, why don't you play it this way?' After a lot of fussing, Coppel would eventually say, 'The way you did it this morning was best.' Then they would all go into a huddle over a nice cuppa. Rehearsals sometimes dragged on until after midnight, ignoring the weary stagehands yawning in the wings and getting paid for feeling tired and just hanging around.

What a contrast to George Highland, producer for J.C. Williamson musicals for many years, who had just retired. George produced the first *Maid of the Mountains* in 1921, starring Gladys Moncrieff. He had a photographic memory and could reproduce exactly the shows he had seen overseas. His rehearsals ran with clock-like precision. A down-to-earth producer, he never minced words. He would sit in the stalls and yell, 'Leave that fairy stuff to the fairies.' To hear him admonishing artists, you would never think he had a heart brimming over with kindness. Frank remembered him reducing Josie Melville to tears in rehearsals. He was as great a teacher as he was a producer and turned many promising Australians into stars. To use Frank's words: 'He could take a sphinx and turn it into a sparkling Cleopatra.'

Although he was such a disciplinarian, everyone in the theatre loved this 'dear old man,' as they called him. But not everyone realised what a generous nature he had. On one occasion a collection was being taken up for the widow of a stagehand. The money was to help her pay for a house. When George was approached for a donation, he asked, 'How much have you got?' '£50,' was the reply. 'And how much is the house?' asked George. '£2,000,' said the collector. 'Here's £1,950,' said George, writing out a cheque, 'and don't tell anyone where you got it.'

Despite the many people George Highland helped in so many ways, there were only three people at his funeral in April 1954—the minister, the undertaker, and Claude Kingston, representing J.C. Williamson Ltd.

At The Belmont we were close to 'Gnaroo', Charlie Tait's house, named after the Tait family home, in the Melbourne suburb of Ivanhoe. Most of the celebrities the brothers brought from overseas, as well as local artists, were entertained there by the genial Charlie and his charming wife Lizzie. For their son, Ivan, and daughters, Cecil, Gwen and Marie, meeting people famous in the theatrical world was just part of their everyday lives and they grew up loving the theatre as much as their father did. Nearby, too, was Clarendon House, also a home away from home for interesting personalities and the setting for many wonderful parties after the brothers bought it for their sister Amy. Formerly the residence of Reggie Bright, of Gibbs, Bright and Company, shipping agents, this stately home became an exclusive guesthouse under the capable management of Amy and Eadie Scott, her son's wife.

In 1895, when she was twenty-one, Amy had married Jack Scott, the brother of John Tait's wife Victoria. They had two sons, Frank and Allan, but the marriage broke up after many arguments over the boys' upbringing. Amy's brothers assisted her in many ways after she left her husband, and she, in turn, was always first on their doorstep to help out in an emergency, proving she could handle any situation if allowed to do it her way. The humdrum of domesticity held no appeal for Amy, and she always longed to be a part of the theatre. In the early 1900s, when Ted was treasurer of Williamson's and was having trouble with the management of the sweet shop attached to the Theatre Royal in Melbourne, Amy persuaded him to let her run it and successfully did so for some time. Later, when her brothers were all managing directors of The Firm, she was tried out in various roles but never seemed to find her niche.

Clarendon House provided the answer. Her bright personality and love of people contributed greatly to the popularity of the guesthouse, but she would not have returned any profit had it not been for the restraining hand of Eadie. Amy believed in giving her guests the best of everything and never needed a reason to throw a party. She had met many of the artists who stayed there on the occasions she had gone abroad with E.J. on his talent hunts. Her guests also included prominent men and women from other walks of life attracted by the warmth of her welcome and consideration for their comfort.

Former Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes was a frequent visitor and one of the greatest admirers of Amy as a hostess and friend. When Billy was at Clarendon House its guests never wanted for entertainment. Victorian journalist Claude McKay and his wife Dorothy made Clarendon House their home whenever they were in Melbourne. They remembered Billy on misty mornings and foggy nights drawing his chair close to the glowing fire and yarning about celebrities he had known, complete with character sketches. He told them he regularly corresponded with Winston Churchill and spoke of the long and intimate letters written to him by that great man, whose rare gifts and remarkable memory never ceased to amaze him. Once Billy had accompanied Churchill by train to Manchester, where Churchill had to deliver an important speech. During the journey he was going over his statement, a typescript of which he handed to Billy when they reached their destination. Billy followed his speech that night from the script, Churchill speaking without notes. 'He never missed a word,' related Billy. 'Damn, he never missed a comma even.'

When Eadie died in 1947, Clarendon House was sold to the Mercy Hospital, and Amy, at the age of seventy-two, retired. But she never lost her zest for life. Only a year before her death, in 1959, and as sprightly as ever at eighty-three, she got herself up as a swaggie and carried off first prize at a ship's fancy dress dance while travelling to England with E.J.'s wife Nita.



86. Viola, 1941. Photo: Spencer Digby, Wellington

SPENCER DIGBY
WELLINGTON

New Zealand

As we organised ourselves for the New Zealand tour, I kept thinking that by the time we returned to Melbourne everyone would know that Frank and I were to be married. Sara and I were looking forward to the sea trip as a temporary rest from so much Gilbert and Sullivan. We sailed on 29 December 1940 in the *Empress of Russia*, a troopship that carried a limited number of civilian passengers, as all merchant shipping had been cancelled. On this trip it had a large contingent of Australian and New Zealand airforce men who were en route to Canada and England for final training before going into action. Among them was Bill Tait, E.J.'s only son, who had come over to Sydney from New Zealand to farewell his parents.

Bill's bright, friendly personality reminded me of his father, and he was the life of a rollicking party he gave in his cabin on our last evening at sea. The smoke-filled atmosphere sent me looking for purer air, and, as I left, Bill followed me. 'I know all about you and Uncle Frank,' he said with a smile. I was taken aback. 'You know too much. Who told you?' I asked. 'Father,' he answered. 'He's generally right. I'm glad, anyhow.' I thanked him and we parted. That was the last time I saw Bill. He was killed in an air crash about a year later.

Our arrival in Auckland's delightful harbour was never to be forgotten. Our ship, which was under convoy, had had to divert from the usual course, and the trip had taken us five days. The passport and customs officials were more meticulous than ever, and our clearances took so long we could have been foreigners. Walking down the gangway, we noticed three of our theatrical wardrobe baskets being swung out of the hold and hoisted into the air on a huge wooden platform. Suddenly, to our horror, the rope snapped and the baskets fell into the sea! Bobbing up and down in the water, they looked as though they would disappear forever into Davy Jones' locker. Then, a yell went up from the wharf and ship as one of our stagehands, Ben Worrall, dived fully clothed into the sea, dragging a long rope with him. With this, he tied the handles of the baskets together and, grabbing a long-handled hook, dragged them to safety to the accompaniment of cheers.

Our one hope was that our beautiful costumes had not been ruined. We were opening with *The Gondoliers* at His Majesty's Theatre the following night, and there would be no time to replace them. Reaching the theatre, we found that, although drenched, the costumes were wearable—which was more than could be said for our shoes. They were all damaged beyond repair. Our wardrobe mistress, Jerry, was demented with worry at all the extra work entailed in making the garments presentable for the gala opening. In the meantime, we searched Auckland for shoes. The only suitable ones

87. *Johnny Farrell, c. 1961.*

Photo: Bettina Photography, Auckland

we could get were pompon slippers from McKenzie's store. 'Cut off the pompons and we can do a soft shoe number,' said Len Gotting, trying to strike a cheery note. So, off came the pompons and we were shod, if not suitably, at least in comfort. Our frocks reeked of cleaning fluid despite all efforts to banish the overpowering fumes with perfume. Few people in the audience the next night realised all the panic that had preceded the raising of the curtain, but their enthusiasm made up for all we'd been through to present the opera as though nothing had happened.

One of the highlights of our visit to New Zealand was meeting Johnny Farrell, who was in charge of promotions there for The Firm, and one of its best-loved executives.

A man of all parts, he would keep us amused for hours with anecdotes he had gathered over the sixty years he had been with the company. In one of his reminiscent moods, he told us:

J.C. Williamson started his stage career as a bloodhound, Margot Fonteyn as a snowflake, while my humble beginning was as a wave. It was in Melbourne, in 1881, in the melodrama *Harbour Lights*. I was supposed to wave the canvas that depicted a stormy sea so that a big wave would roll the hero towards the heroine, who was drifting in a boat. But I got stage fright and rolled the wave in the wrong direction, separating the hero from the heroine just as he was about to rescue her. The stage manager quickly lowered the curtain and the audience was none the wiser.

Johnny was born in Melbourne. He became a callboy at the age of eight, rushing to the theatre when he finished school each day. At the age of fifteen, he was office boy to J.C. Williamson during the days of the Triumvirate.¹ His début as a straight actor was with Williamson and Maggie Moore in *Struck Oil*. 'I was the bootblack,' he told me. Johnny later played in the same company as Gladys Moncrieff when she was seventeen and singing in the chorus. In 1893 he was given the lead in *The Mikado*, touring New Zealand with the J.C. Williamson Juvenile Opera Company. Johnny was associated with every Gilbert and Sullivan company

1. The Triumvirate was the name used to describe the partnership founded by J.C. Williamson, Arthur Garner and George Musgrove in 1882.

for fifty years, and was practically word perfect on every one of the operas. His stage career was cut short when his administrative ability was recognised and he was made advance agent for The Firm. He later became publicity expert and company manager. He enjoyed his move to the other side of the footlights, and J.C. Williamson Ltd greatly benefited from his change of vocation.

Johnny had many close friends among theatrical celebrities. Evidence of this would be produced if he offered you a cigarette. It was always worthwhile looking at the silver case he held out to see which famous admirer had given it to him. At various times I saw cases inscribed by H.B. Irving, Oscar Asche, Mischa Levitzki, Wilkie Bard and Evie Hayes. At home he had silver cigarette boxes from Dion Boucicault and Irene Vanbrugh and a golf club from Richard Crooks. On the lapel of his evening suit he always wore a pin in the shape of a flag studded with rubies, diamonds and sapphires, given to him by Gladys Moncrieff. He also wore a gold watch, the gift of the well-known English actress, Ada Reeve.

In New Zealand, where Johnny spent the greater part of his life, no show would have been complete without him in the background, puffing away at his inevitable cigar. Before he died, in 1965, aged 90, Johnny would claim to be J.C. Williamson's oldest employee. His experience in every aspect of the theatre had been invaluable to the company.

Wellington, where we had our next gala opening, was the home of most of The Firm's New Zealand directors. I was intrigued to find myself in the midst of McKenzies, Duncans and Campbells. It was like stepping foot in Aberdeen or in Oban, the gateway to the Hebrides. There was also a Welshman in the midst of this Scottish clan. This was Harold Edwards, attorney for Sir John McKenzie, chairman of the company which now controlled J.C. Williamson Ltd. Harold Edwards was also a representative of the J.C. Williamson Picture Corporation.

The Lord Mayor of Wellington gave us a civic reception in the Town Hall, but the weather didn't quite favour the Sunday-best clothes we had worn in his honour. It lashed rain and hail and a high wind blew most of us off our feet. 'Windy Wellington' was putting on its traditional welcome for us. We were each asked to make a speech. Ivan Menzies, in his inimitable way, said, 'God has sent us a storm of welcome to re-arm ourselves for greater things to come.' As a disciple of Moral Re-Armament, he preached its gospel whenever possible. My little speech at least raised a laugh. I said, 'I wish God had told me to bring my Wellington boots. I know now how they came to be named after this city and not the Duke of Wellington!'

I was disappointed that Frank was unable to join me in Wellington, but he had been trying to deal with the blow the government had dealt in freezing American currency. This move would curtail The Firm's ability to buy shows in America and maintain the office there. Frank and his brothers were concerned that Dorothy Stewart, their representative in New York, would not be able to operate without sufficient funds to meet her expenses. She reassured them, however, that she would economise to a bare minimum and was sure that the goodwill of J.C. Williamson Ltd and J. & N. Tait would help tide them over this difficult period.

It was eight weeks before Frank was able to get to Christchurch. After this long separation, we had hoped to have a day to ourselves, but it was not to be. Sir John and Lady McKenzie kindly invited us, and the other principals of the company, to their beautiful property 'Roydon Lodge', named after their sons Roy and Don. One of Sir John's hobbies seemed to be collecting racing cars. He lent Frank a Cord, which he had bought in America during one of his many trips there. He told us there was only one other of these cars in New Zealand. Only a few were built before the Auburn Automobile Car Company, of Indiana, which made the first model in 1929, went into liquidation in 1937.

Any hope of testing the Cord for speed was thwarted when we got off the beaten track and Frank, preoccupied with looking for a good parking spot, landed the car in a rut—and there it stuck! His efforts to get it going again were futile. When he lifted the bonnet, a complicated mass of wires and tubes like a jigsaw puzzle confronted us. The only sign of life on that lonely road was a few inquisitive black crows hovering above us. Eventually we found a farmer, who left his ploughing to try and help us, but the Cord's mechanism was as big a mystery to him as it had been to Frank. The farmer helped us by phoning the office. Harry Strachan, who was managing the company's tour, sent a car and we made it to the theatre just in time for me to prepare for the evening performance. The expensive Cord had to be towed to a garage, and there it remained until Roy McKenzie returned from the war and got it going again.

Dunedin's welcome was warm and friendly. Queen Victoria looked down on us with a forbidding stony stare as we walked through the gardens, but Robert Burns, standing beside his plough and dwarfing the great lady, warmed my Scottish heart. Many of the Scots who go to New Zealand congregate in Dunedin, so perhaps this is why Scotland's greatest bard towers over Her Majesty.

My tweeds and brogues were well in keeping with the atmosphere, and my antique Cairngorm stone brooch, which had belonged to Bonnie Prince Charlie, was admired by many. I had come all the way to Melbourne to find this historic brooch with its large stone surrounded by a design of Edinburgh Castle and the *fleur-de-lis* in hand-beaten silver.

Dunedin I will always remember with affection, not only for its Scottish associations, but because it was there that Frank and I announced our engagement. Before doing so, we spent a wonderful few days together. For the first time, Frank had no office to worry about and I had no rehearsals. We enjoyed driving through the attractive countryside and this gave us a good opportunity to discuss plans for our future together. In our lives, our families played an important part. I regarded my father and aunts as my responsibility. Frank's love and concern for his three daughters reflected the love he had had for his first wife. He had known much happiness in a united family, darkened only by the loss of his son Peter at the age of ten years and the death of his wife in 1938. Frank's sincerity moved me deeply as we discussed the past and our future. Our situation was not a simple one.

Frank's eldest daughter Joan was married with a fifteen-month-old daughter, Diana. Peggy, twenty-three, and Ruth, seventeen, were living at home. There was a housekeeper, whom I had briefly met, and who had been with the family for fifteen years. It was difficult for me to imagine how I would be accepted into a well-established household, but I knew that if I tried to approach our life together with understanding and love, we would be happy. I also knew that when moments of adversity arose, Frank would never fail me. Such was our love and faith in each other.

When we finally decided to announce our engagement, we rushed back to the city to send a telegram to Joan, Peggy and Ruth, and a cable to my family before the post office closed. We arrived at the hotel with glowing faces that needed no explanation. Champagne was ordered for dinner and the audience that night witnessed a more than usually lively *Mikado*. After the final curtain fell, Nightie congratulated us on the company's behalf in the surroundings of Titipu. The only ones not in Japanese costume were Frank and Nightie.

It was an exciting few days that followed, answering the many telegrams that poured in, mostly from people I had never met. Among the letters there



88. Eve Gardiner, Gregory Stroud and Viola at Roydon Lodge, Christchurch, 1941

was one from Peggy, and it was written after Frank had told his daughters by letter that he hoped I would marry him. She wrote:

We are all very thrilled about you and Daddy, in fact everyone I have met since has said how pleased they are about it. He is such a darling, and deserves so much happiness. I am quite sure you have, and will make him extremely happy. As you said in your letter, he has lost that set look, and is taking his troubles in a much better way. Poor lamb certainly has had some too, but I needn't tell you about that. All the same I wish you would hurry up and come to Melbourne. We look forward to seeing you very much.

Peggy's letter eased my thoughts considerably. I wanted the girls to know I was anxious to give them my genuine affection.

I also greatly appreciated the letter Mr Nevin sent me, and with it came thoughts of the night he had waved farewell at Waterloo Station. He wrote:



89. *New Zealand, 1941: Frank and Viola's engagement photograph*

I have just received a letter from Frank telling me of his engagement to you and I want to wish you both every happiness. I am sure you will find Frank an affectionate husband and as he is stable in character, this should make for happiness. If I may say so, I formed a very nice impression of you personally even though at the time I had to consider your abilities as an artist only. This resulted in the happy engagement for the Gilbert and Sullivan opera in which I am indeed glad you have enjoyed such splendid success. Anything connected with these operas has always been successful for us and now you are adding to it by taking Frank as your leading man!

Australia is a grand country and I hope you will find it a happy home. Today, it seems like the one paradise in this unhappy world. We have to endure shocking air raids here and you would weep at the destruction of some of our historic churches and other buildings. Despite all these troubles and reverses, the spirit of the people is marvellous and we shall go on with the same spirit until victory is ours.

Frank returned to Melbourne before we had completed the New Zealand tour. The country towns in New Zealand we loved most. The theatres were amazingly well equipped for such remote places and we had an intimate feeling with audiences in the smaller ones. Even too intimate at one matinée when a mother in the front row of the stalls entertained us by changing her baby boy's nappy!

An electricity strike in Napier had an uncomfortable sequel for Richard Watson and an amusing one for us. Richard had been looking forward to sampling New Zealand's choice oysters and had ordered some to eat in his dressing room, which he was sharing with Bernard Manning during *The Mikado*. The dresser, who brought them, forgot the salt and pepper, and in the candle-lit room Richard spotted a salt cellar among Bernard's make-up. Helping himself generously, he ravenously swallowed the oysters before going on stage to sing, only to rush from the stage after his number, yelling for a glass of water. 'My mouth, my mouth, it's stuck!' he cried. 'Whatever was wrong with those oysters? Perhaps it was your lousy salt!' 'Salt?' queried Bernard. 'I have no salt. You must have used the Gripfix for my false teeth that I keep in a shaker.' It took Richard a long time to get his mouth unstuck, and longer still to live down the incident.

We had a return season in Auckland before leaving New Zealand. In the harbour were many warships, and sailors from them took possession of the streets and cafes. We sailed back to Australia in the *Mariposa*, the last of the passenger ships to be converted into a troop ship.

Australia and Marriage

Frank was in Sydney to meet us, but the New Zealand directors were there for board meetings so we could not spend much time together. I had been looking forward to buying my engagement ring with Frank when we returned to Australia, but as he could not come to help me choose one, he asked his sister Amy to take me to Hardy's the jewellers. Amy was wearing a lovely blouse of Madeira lace, and when I admired it she confided that it was made from a table centre. I was not entirely surprised. With wartime clothes rationing it was not unusual for women, finding themselves short of coupons, to raid the linen cupboard for material for frocks or other clothing, and many a gay tablecloth emerged as a dress.

Our Brisbane season was next, and again we played to capacity houses, opening at His Majesty's Theatre on 24 April 1941. Towards the end of the season I spent the weekend in Melbourne with Frank and his family. There was much we had to discuss regarding our wedding, and the date was an important factor. We decided on 16 August 1941 after Marie Bremner consented to take my place in the opera. Frank said I could continue with my career for a few years after we were married, wisely not laying down any hard and fast rules about this. He knew how much I loved my profession and that being independent meant a great deal to me. He let me have my way, probably knowing I would change my views once I settled down to the routine of married life.

Ruth was anxious to accompany me when the company went to Adelaide, and I was pleased when Frank agreed to this as it would give me the opportunity to get to know her. While we were rehearsing *Iolanthe* there, one of the girls in the fairies' chorus took ill and I persuaded Nightie to let Ruth be a stand-in. Although she had never shown any aspirations to be on the stage, Ruth jumped at the chance and, taking her place in the back row, quickly picked up the steps. Frank was arriving the next day and we decided to keep Ruth's stage début a secret. When the curtain went up and he saw a familiar figure tripping hither and thither among the fairies, he could hardly believe his eyes, and to our relief showed no disapproval. Ruth, however, only filled the role for as long as was necessary. Her studies were more important to her and she eventually graduated in science at the University of Melbourne.

Perth was next on our itinerary, and the journey by train over the desert made us realise more than ever the vastness of Australia. For the first time, too, we saw Aboriginal people as they came to meet the train at the various stops.

The day after our arrival in Perth, I was told an elderly gentleman had been inquiring at the stage door for me. He had forgotten to leave his name, but when I heard he had a Scottish accent I immediately thought of Uncle



90. Sara Gregory, Ivan Menzies and Viola,
arriving at Brisbane by special train,
23 April 1941

Jim, Auntie Kate's husband. Next morning, when Sara and I arrived at the theatre to collect our mail, there was Uncle Jim waiting for me. At the age of eighty-three he looked as though he had stepped straight out of the family album. He and Auntie Kate had seen my picture in the newspaper. I couldn't believe I had found them after all this time. My three aunts in Scotland would have been amazed!

Auntie Kate was at the home of her daughter Flora, and among the many members of the family there to greet me was Flora's husband, Ernest Stone. He had visited us in Scotland towards the end of the First World War and I had never forgotten trying on his digger's hat, which he left

behind as a keepsake. The company rejoiced at our reunion and we invited the whole family to the opera, Harry Strachan reserving the front row in the stalls for them. Sitting there in her black satin dress with high ruffled white collar was Auntie Kate, her pink cheeks flushed with excitement, emphasising the white of her hair. Her blue eyes never left the stage. When I made my entrance, Uncle Jim had to be restrained from jumping up and waving, but no one could prevent him from shouting, 'It's hur, it's hur!' The excitement had been too much for Flora, who had undertaken the task of dressing her mother and father, but failed to notice that she had put on two dresses herself! She told me later that she only realised this when she was getting undressed for bed.

Perth seemed like the other end of the world from Frank, but letters and phone calls helped make our separation more bearable. He wrote:

With our wedding so close, I hope my commitments in Sydney at the beginning of August do not prevent us being together a lot before then. I seem to be very unlucky over business and private arrangements clashing and, if necessary, I will tell everyone to go to blazes. I've always told you this is a lousy business for butting in on one's personal affairs. Sir John McKenzie and Harold Edwards have for some strange reason placed implicit confidence in me. This makes it rather awkward as I feel I should be on deck. Perhaps, you are heartily sick of my business worries and if you are angry, please tell me. I never want you to keep anything from me. I know you are very understanding of me and my problems and that's how I always want it to be.



91. *Mr and Mrs Frank Tait on their wedding day, 16 August 1941*



92. Sara Gregory was Viola's only bridesmaid, and the white dress she wore became her wedding dress when she married Richard Stone in London in April 1942. Photo: Basil Shackleton, London

The Perth season finished with a gala night, and we were sorry to leave this beautiful city and the magnificent hospitality lavished on us during our six weeks there. But, for me, it meant going home to Melbourne and the end of my time away from Frank. He had been inundated with letters from my family. My father was delighted at our engagement and must have spent hours composing his formal letter, 'giving away my hand' and 'sanctioning our union'.

After the bombing of London for the first time, I was distressed at the thought of my father living there alone. With true Scottish stubbornness, he refused to move from the danger zone until my sister was able to take him to Scotland. They had no sooner settled in at Burnside, a suburb of Glasgow, when the Clydeside blitz started. Their house was near the docks, and Glasgow had many direct hits, causing havoc and disaster. My aunts, with whom my father was staying, wrote to tell me they had a beautiful air-raid shelter, which they shared with the next-door neighbours. It had two doors, heating, electric light, a carpet and six well-padded car seats discarded by a used-car firm. It had cost £70. When there was an air raid, they 'had to run out the back door, climb through an opening in the hedge and down the stairs to the shelter.' The three old dears were making light of all this inconvenience, but I could read between the lines and imagine only too well the anxious days and nights they were experiencing.



93. *Peggy Tait, 1932, aged 16, painted by Bess Norris, wife of Nevin Tait*



94. *Ruth Tait, 1928, aged 5*



95. *Viola and Joan Masters, Frank's eldest daughter, c. 1941*

My father was asthmatic and could not stand being cooped up in the shelter for long. He wrote:

The sirens went off the night of the Clydeside raid so I went to the door to see if there was any sign of the dreadful Huns. I saw the planes and heard the bombs dropping. The sky was an inferno and things got a bit hot so I went inside and just as well. One plane was brought down over Burnside nearby, its own bombs blowing it to pieces after a hit from one of our guns. Don't worry about me. This war will be over soon and we are not alone in the battle. We will win and put Hitler and Mussolini where they belong.

Like my people at home, I never thought for a minute we would lose the war, but I found in Australia, particularly among young people, a certain apathy. I would hear them say, 'If we lose the war ...'. But such a thought never entered the heads of those in the midst of it. Shortly after the blitz over Glasgow, my father moved to Ardrishaig, where he remained safely until the end of the war.

16 August 1941—our wedding day, marred only by not having my family present, but Frank's family and friends partly compensated for this by making me feel I had known them all my life. Eve's husband, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard York, ably took my father's place and gave me away. Sara was my only

bridesmaid, and the white frock she wore became her wedding dress when she returned to England to marry Richard Stone while he was on leave from the army.

Members of the Gilbert and Sullivan Company hurried from the matinée to the Toorak Presbyterian Church for the ceremony. Their singing of the hymns and psalms nearly lifted the roof and the Very Reverend John McKenzie said he had never heard such magnificent singing in his church before. While the register was being signed, my one-time singing teacher, Francesca Duret, sang Greig's 'I love thee'.

Outside there were many well-wishers, and among them I spotted the little old lady who had given me a pedicure that morning. Not realising who I was, she had asked me, 'What do you think of the Tait wedding today? A bit old for her, isn't he?' I am still wondering what she thought when she saw me emerge from the church!

At the reception at Frank's home, Amy was hostess. Every second guest seemed to be a Tait and I suddenly realised I had that day become a wife, a stepmother, an aunt and a great aunt! And it was only eighteen months since I had come to this country, more than 10,000 miles from Bonnie Scotland. Among the guests was my shipboard friend, Arabelle Calder. She had married Jock Edmond, an architect from Scotland, and was living in Melbourne.

Our honeymoon destination had been kept a secret. Surfers Paradise meant nothing to me, but it sounded ideal, and it certainly was, with its long, snowy white beach, glorious surf and perfect weather for sunbaking. It had not yet become part of the Gold Coast, lined with luxury hotels, expensive flats and smart shops. Frank told me he had been advised to take a holiday about the time I first arrived in Melbourne and had actually booked in to the Surfers Paradise Hotel. It was flattering to hear I was the reason for cancelling his arrangement so soon after meeting me!

After the honeymoon I did not return to the theatre for a month, which enabled me to settle down in my new home and get to know the housekeeper, Miss Barker. Everyone called her Barker. She never liked being reminded of her spinsterhood, so preferred us to drop the 'Miss'. When she died, fifteen years later, we felt her loss keenly as she had become so much a part of the family.

With the conclusion of the Gilbert and Sullivan season, the next production was *Lilac Time*, which opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 21 February 1942. I played the part of the heroine, Lili Veit, Peggy Shea was the foreign prima donna, and John Fullard, whose beautiful tenor voice suited the music so well, made an excellent Schubert. During our love scene, when I sang to him 'Tell me dear flower, the secret tell', I could have cheerfully killed him when he stood with his back to the audience crossing his eyes and pulling funny faces. The company fitted into their roles perfectly, but we were without Ivan Menzies, who had decided to take a holiday.

Rehearsals started in Melbourne, and Frank drove me to the theatre each morning. I would come home in the afternoon for a rest before dinner, then go



96. *Lilac Time*: Viola as Lili Veit, 1942

March 28th
1942

His Majesty's Theatre

PROPRIETORS: J. C. WILLIAMSON LTD.

MANAGING DIRECTORS: E. J. TAIT, FRANK S. TAIT, JOHN H. TAIT, J. NEVIN TAIT (London)

COMMENCING SATURDAY, 21st FEBRUARY, 1942

J. C. WILLIAMSON THEATRES

Present

"LILAC TIME"

A Play with Music by FRANZ SCHUBERT. Arranged by H. Berte and G. H. Clutsam.

Libretto by Dr. A. M. Willner and H. Reichert.

English Version and Lyrics by Adrian Ross.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Franz Schubert	JOHN FULLARD
Baron Franz von Schober (a Poet)	GREGORY STROUD
Moritz von Schwind (a Painter)	VINCENT McMURRAY
Johann Michel Vogl (an Opera Singer)	MAXWELL OLDAKER
Kappel (a Draughtsman)	ROBERT HEALEY
Christian Veit (Court Glassmaker)	BERNARD MANNING
Marie Veit (his Wife)	VALERIE WALSH
Lili Veit	VIOLA WILSON
Willi Veit	RUBY RIDDELL
Tilli Veit	ELVA BLAIR
Demoiselle Flammetta Marini (La Marinella)	PEGGY SHEA
Count Scharntorff (Danish Ambassador)	RICHARD WATSON
Andreas Braun (a Saddler)	PHIL MILES
Ferdinand Binder (a Postmaster)	JOHN SANGER
Novotny (a Detective)	LEN GOTTING
Rosi (Marini's Maid)	SISCA NAVARETTI
Mrs. Grimm (a Caretaker)	VERA DEARSLEY
Mrs. Weber (a Lodger)	NOREEN REIDY
Sally (Servant to Veit)	JOYCE MUNDY
Stingl (a Confectioner)	JOSEPH MORLEY
Waiters	JACK STEWART, HICKEY TAYLOR
Schani (a Page)	MASTER FRANK HAHN

Produced by H. C. NIGHTINGALE

Musical Director—LEO PACKER

[Programme continued overleaf]

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GILBERT & SULLIVAN COMPANY

in a

GLORIOUSLY NEW PRODUCTION

of

"Nightbirds"

("Fledermaus")



Oh what a night! what a feast of Joy!

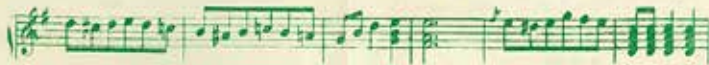
A Comic Operetta in Three Acts

by Johann Strauss

Produced by CLIVE CAREY

COMMENCING

Saturday, 4th April, 1942

Thrill to the Glorious Music of Johann Strauss**"Nightbirds"****CAST OF CHARACTERS:**

Gabriel von Eisenstein	MAX OLDAKER
(A Gentleman of independent means)	
Rosalinda (his Wife)	THEA PHILIPS
Frank (Governor of the Gaol)	RICHARD WATSON
Prince Orlofsky	PEGGY SHEA
Alfred (an Opera Singer)	JOHN FULLARD
Dr. Falke (Notary)	GREGORY STROUD
Dr. Blind (Lawyer)	LEN GOTTING
Adèle (Rosalinda's Maid)	VIOLA WILSON
Franch (Warder)	BERNARD MANNING
Molly (Adèle's Sister)	ELVA BLAIR
Ivan (Servant to Orlofsky)	JOHN CLEMENTS

With CHORUS and FULL OPERATIC ORCHESTRA

SYNOPSIS OF SCENERY:

ACT I.—Eisenstein's House.

ACT II.—Ballroom at Orlofsky's.

ACT III.—The Prison Director's Office.

During Second Act the Ballet will dance the "Blue
Dunabe" Waltz.

The action takes place in a Watery Place near a
Great City.

Produced by CLIVE CAREY

Johann Strauss, the Viennese composer, who is known for
his waltzes all over the world, wrote also a number of Ope-
rettas, and of these "Nightbirds" is the most brilliant and
the most popular.

In the music Strauss indulges to the full his remarkable
gift for waltzes and polkas, and at the same time frequently
gives a sly dig at the operatic style of the period.

Eisenstein, blessed with an attractive wife, Rosalinda, has
by a foolish escapade come under the arm of the law and
in spite of the efforts of his lawyer Alfred has been sentenced
to eight days in gaol. His friend Falke, however, persuades
him to indulge in a last flutter at a party given by the
young Russian Prince Orlofsky to the ladies of the Ballet,
before serving his sentence. Eisenstein after some hesitation
agrees to join Falke at the Prince's mansion, and taking a
fervent farewell of his wife, leaves the house, ostensibly on
his way to prison. On his departure, Alfred, an old flame
of Rosalinda's, arrives and makes himself at home in Eisen-
stein's absence, but unfortunately Frank, the governor of
the prison, arrives to escort Eisenstein to gaol. He naturally
believes Alfred to be Eisenstein, and encouraged in his mis-
take by Rosalinda (to save her reputation), takes off the
wrong man.

Orlofsky, who suffers from chronic boredom, has given
Falke *carte blanche* to make the party as amusing as pos-
sible, and the latter conceives a plan whereby he may not
only entertain the Prince but also pay off an old score against
Eisenstein. He introduces Eisenstein as a Marquis, invites
Frank and presents him as a French Chevalier, contrives to
bring Adèle, Rosalinda's maid, by an invitation purporting
to come from her sister Molly, a member of the Ballet, and
finally induces Rosalinda herself to appear by sending her
word of her husband's pranks. In Eisenstein's absence
finding Adèle among the guests, his ardent attention to
his own wife (disguised by a mask), and the deep friend-
ship he strikes up with Frank, Orlofsky finds ample amuse-
ment.

Eisenstein's arrival in gaol and his meeting there first with
Frank, then with Alfred and Rosalinda, provide further com-
plications, which are eventually cleared up with the arrival
of the whole company in the prison.

"Nightbirds" was first produced in Vienna in 1874, and
our production is presented in the costume of that period.

(Clive Carey)



99. *Nightbirds*: Viola as Adèle, 1942

back to the theatre for the evening performance. Every night, Frank and John would go to the office to discuss the day's problems and speak on the phone to Sydney, Adelaide and Brisbane. Three musicals and two plays were in production and full reports had to be made on them each night.

Minnie Everett was producing *Lilac Time*. This meant we had a number of the 'gals' from her school in the ballet. It fascinated me to watch them going home after matinées dressed sedately in their school uniforms once more. One pretty little girl was Carrie Moore, the niece of the popular star of the same name, and she had big brown eyes and dimples just like her famous aunt.

Nightbirds, an English version of the Viennese operetta *Die Fledermaus*, was presented as an Easter attraction, opening on 4 April 1942. Clive Carey, from Sadler's Wells in London, was

the director. He was in Melbourne giving master classes at the Albert Street (later Melba) Conservatorium of Music in East Melbourne. Frank had engaged Thea Phillips as the guest artist to sing Rosalinda, and I was her maid Adèle. Thea had come to Australia in 1934 as a prima donna with Sir Benjamin Fuller's Grand Opera Company. Prior to this, Sir Thomas Beecham had chosen her specially to sing the soprano solos in Handel's *Messiah* at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Against herself, she told the story about a rehearsal with Sir Thomas, when he asked her, 'Why are you singing so many wrong notes?' Trembling, she stammered, 'It will be all right on the night, Sir Thomas, I'll study the score tonight in bed and work hard.' 'Ah,' said Sir Thomas, famous for his wit, 'then I am sure we will have an Immaculate Conception on the night.'

Henry Krips, an Austrian conductor, had been in Australia for just a few months when Frank engaged him to conduct the opera. As he was not yet a member of the Musicians' Union, the orchestra threatened to strike if he conducted. He was a great favourite and brought the right Viennese touch to the opera at rehearsals, so it was a great disappointment when all efforts to placate the Union failed. Gabriel Joffe, who was standing by, conducted our opening performance and the rest of the season. Henry Krips went to Adelaide, where he became the resident conductor for the ABC South Australian Symphony Orchestra and was greatly loved for many years.



100. Gregory Stroud as Dr Falke



101. *Leo Packer, JCW musical director*



102. *Harry Strachan, JCW manager/director*

Most singers have their favourite musical directors. In the D'Oyly Carte Company, Isidore Godfrey, a red-haired conductor, was the only musical director since Sir Malcolm Sargent to conduct the operas with graceful movements. He danced to the music and gave the singers their cue with an arched little finger, frequently turning with a smiling face to the audience to acknowledge their applause. My favourite of them all was our musical director in Australia, Andrew MacCunn, who was with J.C. Williamson's for over fifty years. Andrew migrated to Sydney as a young man and joined The Firm in 1904, succeeding French conductor and composer Leon Caron. Never in all that time was Andrew seen during a performance to have a score in front of him, whether he was conducting an opera, a ballet, a musical comedy or the complete repertoire of his favourite Gilbert and Sullivan operas!

Andrew was born in Greenock, Ayrshire, in Scotland. His brother Hamish wrote a number of choral and orchestral pieces, chiefly on Scottish subjects, and composed a Scottish opera, *Jeanie Deans*, which brought him fame. Andrew composed a musical play, *The Gardener's Dream*, especially for the well-loved Australian comedian George Lauri, and it was first performed with great success in Sydney in 1906. In later years Andrew was musical director at the Theatre Royal. He had an office in Williamson House, where he arranged many musical scores. He never failed to give singers confidence and was always

reliable with the tempos in the operas. Leo Packer and Gabriel Joffe assisted him and became The Firm's musical directors after Andrew retired in 1960. He died in 1966 at the age of eighty-three.

Leo Packer was an all-round musician and the musical director of the many Gilbert and Sullivan tours The Firm made in Australia and New Zealand and when the company went to South Africa. He also directed many musicals with Gladys Moncrieff in Melbourne and on tour in Australia and New Zealand. Gabriel Joffe was another favourite of mine. 'Gabby', as we called him, graduated as Doctor of Music at the University of Riga in Latvia. He left his country early in 1939 with his wife and family and came to Australia, where he was resident conductor for twenty-five years with J.C. Williamson Theatres. Melbourne was his base, but he often toured with the company when it was necessary.

Another important and efficient member of our team was Harry Strachan, whom we all loved. He was very popular with the company and was always welcomed with open arms on pay day. In later years Harry became a director of The Firm beside Harald Bowden in Sydney. Later, Harry and Syd Irving, who for many years was The Firm's representative in Brisbane, along with John McCallum, as managing director, did a magnificent job keeping the JCW flag flying through the difficult years after Frank's death in 1965.

On 19 March 1941, at His Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, a gala matinée was held for the Lord Mayor's Queen Carnival. The *Rio Rita* company, then appearing in Melbourne, together with a number of well-known stars presented the programme, but it was Gladys Moncrieff, who had come from Sydney specially to sing at the matinée, who stole the limelight. The audience gave her such a remarkable reception that the Tait brothers were unanimous she should make a comeback in the show the public loved her best in—*The Maid of the Mountains*. The operetta duly opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 17 October 1942, at the end of the Gilbert and Sullivan season. It was a memorable first night and a triumphant return for 'Our Glad'. Glowing reviews in the papers endorsed the opinion of all that she had shone as never before in the role of Teresa.

During rehearsals, work stopped behind the stage as stage hands and men from the workshop and offices crowded into the wings just to hear their old favourite sing. I had never seen *The Maid of the Mountains* before. Neither had I met Gladys, until one morning backstage at the theatre when Frank introduced me to her. Gladys was being complimented by members of the company on her streamlined appearance. Following a car accident in 1938, she had been on crutches for a long time with a broken ankle and had put on so much weight during her period of immobility that she had to slim down before she could appear on the stage again. She laughed as she told us that when she left hospital, one of the papers innocently reported: 'Gladys Moncrieff had so many flowers sent to her in hospital that when she left, she was literally covered with orchids—they were even pinned to her crotch.' When I heard of the public's great concern for Gladys after the accident and the frequent



103. Gladys Moncrieff, 1950s. Photo: Ritter-Jeppesen Studios

bulletins over the radio about her condition, I was reminded of the similar devotion shown to Gracie Fields by her admiring public in England after her serious illness.¹

I had temporarily retired from the stage as I was expecting my first child. Most evenings I would accompany Frank to the theatre, timing our arrival to hear Gladys singing what we termed our appropriate song, 'Love will find a way'. The song brought thunderous applause from packed houses night after night and demands for many encores before the audience would let the show continue. With other old favourites, it rekindled memories in the hearts of the older generation, while the youngsters swooned over the romantic Max Oldaker and John McCallum, who alternated in the role of Baldasarre. *The Maid of the Mountains* ran in Melbourne for three months and was followed by *The Merry Widow*, with Gladys in another of her great roles, before the two shows went to Sydney. A string of other musical comedies starring Gladys followed.

Gladys was dedicated to her career. Only at weekends did she allow herself any latitude with her dieting and indulge in the fun of entertaining her friends. She was a generous hostess and I never hear Black Velvet mentioned without recalling the wonderful parties she gave. She would serve her own special brew of champagne and stout from a large crystal bowl, and many theatrical successes were toasted with the delicious beverage. Apart from raising large sums of money for patriotic funds, Gladys entertained troops in New Guinea in 1943 and was the first Australian to give concerts for troops in Korea, which she visited in 1951. Her services were recognised when she was awarded the OBE in 1952.

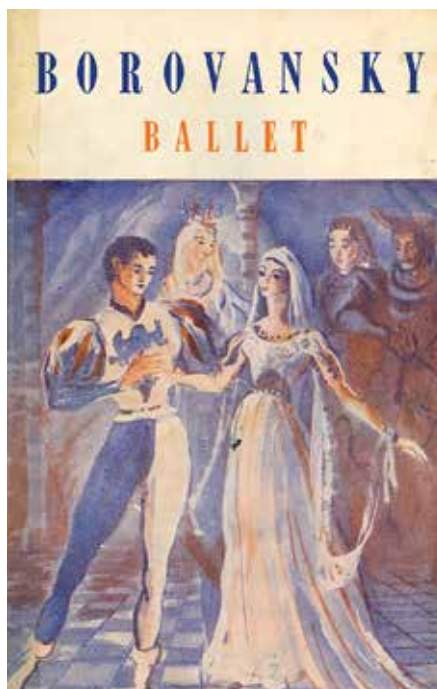
During the run of *Nightbirds* in 1942, Melbourne had its own 'invasion' when thousands of American soldiers made the barracks in St Kilda Road their headquarters. Their presence was a great comfort at a time when the Japanese were gradually closing in on our shores. Citizens could not do enough for them, and many parties and outings were arranged for their entertainment. Allan McKay introduced two high-ranking officers to Frank and he invited them home for dinner. They told us that although so much was being done for their boys, they were often at a loose end on weekends. There were the parties given for them by Sir Norman and Lady Brookes at 'Kurneh' and Lady Clapp's 'Fly Flag' gatherings at the Hotel Australia, both on Sunday nights, but these were always so popular that many had to be turned away and had nowhere else to go.

Frank and I offered to have a party at our home for about thirty of the men one Sunday night and the American army officials insisted on supplying the food for it. On the Sunday morning, while Joan, Ruth, Peggy, Barker and I were preparing for our guests, army headquarters phoned to say the numbers had grown, but there was no need to worry, the food situation would be taken care

1. Gracie Fields made a slow but full recovery from cervical cancer in 1939.



104. Edouard Borovansky, 1940s



105. Programme featuring cover design by William Constable, 1954–1956

of. Up came the carpet in the drawing room for dancing and we were ready for our guests. About 6.00 p.m., the boys and their girlfriends started arriving and there was a steady flow until after midnight. After the first two hundred, we lost count. The house was like Grand Central Station in New York!

Large vans loaded with turkeys, huge cuts of cooked wing ribs, salads and American sweet pies kept rolling up the drive, and as fast as the food was placed on the tables it disappeared. The washing-up piled up like a nightmare. Glasses were our main problem, and when Frank, Barker and I were not at the sink washing them, we were serving drinks in them. We felt like strangers in our own house, and over and over again I was taken for a drinks waitress! A little bald-headed man, who turned out to be a general, called to me every time I passed him, 'Hi, Miss, another cawfee and make it quick.' Frank glared at him as I said, 'Yes, sir,' and bustled off, limping to the kitchen with aching feet. I had long discarded my shoes. An American nurse remarked, 'Nice joint you've got here, Miss.' Every room in the house was in use and every stair was sat upon. It was almost impossible to walk up the stairs. Some of the guests went up and didn't come down for the rest of the evening. Shoes, which we found in the oddest places next morning, were never claimed.

It was a cold night, and in between our chores at the sink we were throwing logs on the fire for the comfort of the central-heating-minded Yankees. Stepping over one group to put wood on the fire, I heard a nurse describing her harrowing

experiences in the battle of Guadalcanal and I knew then why they had all looked strained and anxious. We had been reading about the bombing only that morning, and some of the nurses and troops had come straight from it, stepping off the plane into the cars which brought them to our party. When Frank offered some of the nurses food, one said, 'Not food, just brandy neat, honey.'

Some years later, we were in New York at a party given by Victor Borge's manager, George Campbell, for Victor and his wife Sanna. One of the guests, who showed great interest when he heard we were Australians, told us about a wonderful party he had been to in Melbourne during the war. He couldn't remember the name of the host and hostess, but they were something to do with the theatre and had offered him a seat for a show. He was Dave Farrell, war correspondent and journalist on a New York paper. It was good to know our efforts had been worthwhile.

The year 1942 was also when Edouard Borovansky gave Australia its first professional ballet company. Having first danced in Australia with Pavlova's company in 1929, he returned with Colonel de Basil's company in 1938 and decided to remain here at the end of the tour. Borovansky had studied at the Prague National Theatre under Augustin Berger, who had received his training alongside Enrico Cecchetti, Pavlova's dancing master for many years. His wife Xenia was Pavlova's niece and had danced under the name of Nicolaeva as a solo artist with Boris Romanoff's company.

Borovansky and Xenia set up their dancing academy not long after settling in Melbourne. Knowing that students needed to gain confidence to perform in front of an audience, they built a small theatre in their studio in Roma House, Elizabeth Street, and were greatly helped in raising money for this by mothers of their pupils, headed by Lady Best.

Sir Robert and Lady Best invited Frank and me to a Sunday night performance there in 1942. Their daughter Roberta was dancing a solo arranged for her by Borovansky, and the proud parents were full of praise for the interest he and Xenia were taking in her. Roberta danced beautifully and no one would have guessed that deafness prevented her from hearing a note of the music. Her fair hair fell in ringlets to her shoulders and she looked as pretty as the flowers she held in her decorative basket. Everyone admired the confidence she showed in trying to overcome her disability.

Borovansky, who became known to us all as Boro, was a disciplinarian in the studio and at rehearsals, and Frank realised that under his expert guidance a good company could rise to great heights and be a wonderful medium for encouraging local talent. He was still doubtful, however, whether the public would accept traditional Russian classical ballet performed by unknown artists. Still, not unmindful of the impression the de Basil company had made on Australian audiences, Frank got together with Borovansky and discussed the idea of arranging a more ambitious programme for the Princess Theatre. As a result of this informal meeting, the Borovansky Ballet Company would perform later that year for the first time.

The season opened for five nights on 27 July 1942 with *Les Sylphides*. The principal dancers were Dorothy Stevenson, who had performed with the de Basil company in London; Laurel Martyn, who had been with the Sadler's Wells company; Edna Busse, Corrie Loders and Martin Rubinstein. Borovansky presented his own choreography in a fantasy based on Greig's Concerto in A minor. A master of mime, he danced the central role of Man, and Anne Mackintosh, that of Woman. Edna Busse was Gaiety, Dorothy Stevenson was Desire, and the *corps de ballet* Temptations and Shadows. Roberta Best was one of the veiled ladies in Temptations and there could not have been prouder parents at the matinée than Sir Robert and Lady Best. The remainder of the programme consisted of four one-act ballets choreographed by Laurel Martyn and Dorothy Stevenson, and finally the master came into his own presenting a one-act ballet of Russian dances choreographed by himself. The entire programme was presented in black drapes and the only music was from two pianos played by Winifred McDonnell and Eric Clapham.

In April 1943, Borovansky, backed by J.C. Williamson Ltd, again presented his company for a five-day season, this time at His Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne. New ballets had been added to the repertoire and these were presented with new sets designed by prominent artists. For *Sea Legends*, costumes were designed by Alan McCulloch, and the elaborate headdresses by Jean Oberhansli. Music and story for the ballet were by Esther Rofe with additional libretto by Dorothy Stevenson, who was also responsible for the choreography. The critics were enthusiastic and their rave notices singled out Martin Rubinstein as a young dancer of great promise and Dorothy Stevenson as a new find in the profession. The short season barely covered expenses, but at least showed increased interest by the public, which was encouraging.



106. *Capriccio Italien*, 1944, choreographed by Edouard Borovansky and designed by William Dargie.
Photo: Jean Stewart

Borovansky's first professional tour under the direction of J.C. Williamson Ltd was to Hobart and Launceston in 1944 with a company of forty and a repertoire of eight ballets. Serge Bousloff and Thadée Slavinsky, former members of visiting Russian ballet companies, had joined him and were a great acquisition. Edna Busse and Serge Bousloff danced the leading parts in *Swan Lake*, and others who danced impressively were Vassilie Trunoff and Max Collis. Well-known artist William Dargie designed costumes and décor for a one-act ballet, *Capriccio Italien*. William Constable provided the sets and costumes for *Vltava* and *Façade*. The pianists were Winifred McDonnell and Kurt Herweg, whose wife was a cousin of Pavlova's. Herweg often conducted for Borovansky, and later, when he became permanent conductor, it was amusing to attend dress rehearsals and witness the clash of foreign temperaments.

Success led to success, and the company went from Hobart to Sydney's Theatre Royal, this time with a full orchestra under the direction of Gabriel Joffe. Borovansky's own version of *Giselle* was refreshing, the ballet having previously been performed as part of the Pavlova company's repertoire in 1929. Set in two acts, the part of Giselle alternated between Dorothy Stevenson and Laurel Martyn. Once again, William Constable designed the sets and costumes. The popularity of this programme led to an extension of the season and the company finished in a blaze of glory, both financially and artistically, to the delight of J.C. Williamson management.

Next came a tour of New Zealand for which Arthur Tait, son of Willie Tait, was appointed manager. This tour was also successful, and on their return to Australia the company again played the capital cities. Between productions, Borovansky made frequent trips to England and the continent, seeking artists. In 1951 he engaged Paul Grinwis, a Dutch ballet dancer, who had been touring with the de Basil company since the war. Grinwis produced several ballets for Borovansky, the most notable being *Romeo and Juliet*, with himself and Kathleen Gorham the principal dancers. In a lighter vein, he also appeared as Captain Belaye in *Pineapple Poll* and as the Headmistress in *Graduation Ball*.



107. Viola and Isla, 1943



108. Marjorie Lawrence, c. 1944. Photo: Bruno

Borovansky also brought out the handsome French dancer and choreographer Robert Pomie, who had been a leading dancer at the Paris Opera Ballet and the partner of Renée (Zizi) Jeanmaire in the French film *Folies Bergère*. Pomie remained in Australia and in 1958 married Kathleen Gorham. They had one son, but were divorced in 1964.

In December 1959, during a Sydney season, Borovansky died suddenly from a heart attack, a shattering blow to the company and to all lovers of dance to whom he had become known as 'the father of Australian ballet'. His funeral was held in Melbourne, and Frank and I attended the impressive service conducted by a Russian priest. At the graveside, Russian customs were observed and seats were provided for the mourners. The Borovansky Ballet was left without a director. Paul Grinwis was appointed acting director-producer until Peggy van Praagh, at Frank's request, came from Europe to serve as artistic director. She proved an able successor to Borovansky.

In Peggy's opinion, a ballet company could only maintain high standards if its dancers worked continually, and not spasmodically as they had had to do under Borovansky. This meant greater expense, and J.C. Williamson Ltd, although anxious to fall in with her wishes, could not do so without a government subsidy. It was impossible to present ballet all year round and show a profit.

The high cost of presenting a new production of *Coppélia* the following season and the lack of public support for this comic ballet resulted in a big loss, but artistically the company had maintained such a high standard that Frank felt more than ever that a government subsidy was needed to ensure its continuity. He had discussions with Dr H.C. Coombs, chairman of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, who agreed to subsidise the ballet. As a result, the Australian Ballet Foundation was formed in 1962 with Frank as chairman to administer, with J.C. Williamson Ltd, the Australian Ballet Company. This was the new name given to the Borovansky Ballet, although many felt that Borovansky's name should have been perpetuated in recognition of his magnificent work in raising the ballet to such a high standard. Peggy van Praagh was appointed artistic director of the new company, and three years later Robert Helpmann became co-director.

In May 1943, Frank and I had our first daughter, Isla Violet Frances, and from then on she was our 'leading lady'. My uncle, who owned the *Paisley Daily Express*, announced the birth in his paper: 'To Mr and Mrs Frank Tait in Australia, a daughter by cable.'

I was truly anchored to domesticity and any chance of resuming my career seemed remote. I practised my singing on Isla and she showed her appreciation by bellowing lustily when I stopped. E.J. made many visits to Melbourne and we often had the pleasure of his company at home. The Tait men adored children, and Isla had many a roughhouse from E.J. while I looked on apprehensively as he tossed her into the air.

During dinner, I always enjoyed listening to the brothers reminiscing about the past and learned a great deal about their boyhood and the history of The



109. *Viola and Isla, 1944.*
Photo: Jean Stewart



110. *Ann's christening, 1945*

Firm. E.J. had an amazing memory, and nobody could fault him on most things, but with names he was sometimes a little forgetful, as instanced one night during the meal when he kept calling me 'Iris'. Neither Frank, Ruth, nor I had the heart to embarrass him by pointing out that Iris was the name of Frank's first wife.

In 1944 the Taits brought Marjorie Lawrence back to Australia; the Victorian-born soprano had left the country to pursue a successful career overseas. She had made her operatic début in Monte Carlo in 1932 as Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* and was the youngest artist ever to sing the role of Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* at the Paris Opera and the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Miss Lawrence was one of the few artists in the history of this role to carry out Wagner's stage directions at the end of *Götterdämmerung* and make her exit on horseback. She even wanted to make the equestrian leap into the flames, but the opera house management would not permit this. Her brother Cyril stood in for her attired as Brünnhilde and performed the daring act.

In 1941, while in Mexico with her husband Dr King, Marjorie was stricken with polio, which should have meant the end of a brilliant career. But the great dramatic soprano was determined to sing again. Greatly helped by her devoted husband and Sister Elizabeth Kenny, the Australian nurse who pioneered a rehabilitation programme for polio, she regained her confidence, though she was never again able to get around without the help of a wheelchair or a frame.

When she returned to Australia in 1944, the first time since her illness, Marjorie was determined to hide her disability from her public as much as possible. She refused to let the audience see her being wheeled onto the platform, lifted on a dais, and strapped to a surgical back rest, which provided the necessary support during the two-hour recitals. The problem was overcome when Charlie White, J.C. Williamson's senior mechanic, designed and made six twenty-foot screens to hide these preparations from the audience. It took six men to move these screens before she commenced singing and then to erect them again before she made her exit. The first glimpse the audience had of Marjorie when the screens were removed was of her sitting on the dais enveloped in a beautiful evening gown and looking like a glittering queen. Of Scottish descent, Marjorie never failed to include many Scottish ballads in her programme and generally finished with Percy Grainger's version of 'Waltzing Matilda'.

When I was told in 1945 that The Firm was bringing my favourite actress, Gracie Fields, to Australia for a concert tour, I looked forward eagerly to her visit with her husband, Monty Banks, the Italian-born film actor and producer. The announcement of her tour aroused immediate public interest. Our telephone hardly stopped ringing, new-found friends wanting to know if we could help them get good seats. Queues stretched for half a mile outside Allan's in Collins Street, the only place where advance bookings could be made



111. Gracie Fields with the Tait brothers: E.J., Frank and John, 1945

for Gracie's nine concerts in the Melbourne Town Hall. In other States, it was the same story.

Our second daughter, Viola Ann, born in December 1944, was six months old when Gracie and Monty arrived in Australia, and with two small children to look after I could not accompany Frank to Sydney to meet their plane. John, E.J. and Frank were at Mascot to greet them, as were hundreds of other people who had been waiting for hours to give Gracie a rousing Lancashire welcome. When she stepped from the plane, as natural as ever, nobody was disappointed. Frank told me on the phone, 'The little lass is wonderful and her enthusiasm is infectious. Everywhere, she has fans following her. She has a cheery word for them all and even sings a few bars from her popular songs as she passes them.'

On the night of their arrival in Melbourne, Gracie and Monty invited us to supper in their suite at Menzies' Hotel. Barker shared my excitement and helped me dress quickly after I had put the babies to bed. She insisted I wear the orchid Gladys Moncrieff had given me the previous evening. Monty greeted us at the hotel with a typical warm Italian welcome and 'Gracie is changing but won't be long.' He yelled to her to hurry up and a tired voice replied, 'I'm hurrying oop. I'll be there in a minute.'

I was impatient to see her and hoped she was not taking too much trouble with her dressing. When the door opened, there was Gracie in Monty's dressing



112. Monty Banks and Gracie Fields at the Melbourne Town Hall, 1945: Frank Tait and Claude Kingston are standing to the right of Gracie, and Dorothy Stewart is behind Monty



113. E.J. and Frank, c. 1945



114. *Publicity photo of Viola, 1946. Photo: Athol Shmith*



115. *The Dancing Years*: Viola as Maria Ziegler



116. *The Dancing Years*: Max Oldaker as Rudi Kleber and Viola as Maria Ziegler. Photo: Jean Stewart



117. *The Dancing Years*, curtain call: Viola (centre) with Max Oldaker and Elizabeth Gaye (left) and Gabriel Joffe and Eve Gardiner (right). Photo: Jean Stewart

gown and slippers, her hair screwed up in bobby pins! She had taken off her make-up and her greeting was as informal as her appearance. 'That's much better now. I feel relaxed. Sit down and put your feet up.' My orchid felt as heavy as lead.

Gracie's natural charm was the secret of her great success. I had never seen Frank and his brothers so enthusiastic about an artist. John, who usually only grunted his approval, adored Gracie and showed it. She teased him about the little wisp of hair that always hung down under his hat and even this he didn't mind from her. E.J. also openly worshipped her, and her visit to Australia was the beginning of a lifelong friendship with the Tait family. Often Frank and I would travel back to the hotel with Gracie after her concert, and as the car crept away from the Town Hall, people would flock all around it trying to touch their idol's hand. Terrified of an accident, Gracie would shoo them away, but the fans never took her seriously and thought she was just being funny.

Gracie donated the money she received from her concerts in Australia and New Zealand to help those who had suffered in the war, and in view of this, The Firm added its profits too, making a total of £64,427. This was but one instance of Gracie's generosity over the years to deserving causes. As well, she entertained servicemen in practically all theatres of war, her first thought being for the patients in military hospitals. Her radiant personality never failed to cheer them.

For some time during my spell from the stage I had been torn between my profession and my family and wanted to prove I could do justice to both. The opportunity came when, in May 1946, I made a comeback as Maria Ziegler in Ivor Novello's operetta *The Dancing Years*, which had been a success in London, with Ivor and Mary Ellis in the leads. The urge to return to the stage was too strong to resist, as by this time I had been able to get a good nurse for the children.

To ensure as far as possible an exact replica of the London production, Leontine Sagan, who had produced it at Drury Lane, was engaged by J.C. Williamson Ltd. Max Oldaker was cast as Rudi Kleber (Novello's star role); Myles Wright, who had just returned from the war, was Prince Charles Metterling; Eve Gardiner made an imposing Madame Kurt; Philip Edgley was Rudi and Maria's son; while the lively part of Grete was played by Elizabeth Gaye. There were delightful ballet interludes in the story and this provided a wonderful opportunity for the Borovansky Ballet to reassemble. Peggy Sager danced the principal role in *The Lorelei*, an opera within the play, and when she left for overseas to further her career, her place was taken by Kathleen Gorham, then an unknown dancer from the *corps de ballet*.

Although I enjoyed my return to the stage, it became clear to me that my husband, children and home meant more to me than my career, and I decided to retire when *The Dancing Years* finished its Melbourne season, a decision I have never regretted. At the same time, it was wonderful to know the theatre would still be an important part of my life from the other side of the footlights with Frank constantly by my side.



118. *Frank Tait and John Charles Thomas, 1947*



119. *Frank Tait (far right) in New York with soprano Vivian Della Chiesa, whom he has just signed up for an Australian tour, 1946*

Leontine Sagan next produced *Gay Rosalinda*, another English version of *Die Fledermaus*, starring Tara Barry, a soprano who had been brought out from London to play the lead. Tara also took the part of Maria Ziegler when *The Dancing Years* went to Sydney. She was at home with Australians, having sung to many of them in RAAF camps in England during the war. After E.J. had taken her on a whirlwind sightseeing tour by car around Sydney, she laughingly remarked, 'And they say the Americans are fast! I've seen so much in such a short time.'

The year 1947 was a busy one for J. & N. Tait Ltd, who brought to Australia many accomplished artists. The concerts of John Charles Thomas were one of the greatest treats for music lovers. A consummate showman, he was master of a voice that followed with ease every mood he wished to convey. His father had been a Methodist minister in Pennsylvania and, as a boy, he had sung at camp meetings where his father preached. This was partly why he could sing religious songs with such great feeling. But whether it was Christian hymns, grand opera or light musical comedy, John Charles enthralled audiences wherever he sang. He had the muscular physique of a fighter, broad shoulders and narrow hips, and he attributed his fine condition to outdoor exercise. His favourite pastime was golf, and he and Frank spent many hours together on the golf courses of Sydney and Melbourne.

When John Charles arrived in Melbourne it was the middle of winter, and the first thing he asked for in his suite at Menzies Hotel was the placing of electric heaters in every room, including the bathroom and even the passages outside the doors to keep out the draughts. On stage in the Melbourne Town Hall, he also requested heaters beside every door. He was a wonderful host and generally entertained his friends in his suite after the concerts. So hot were the rooms, however, that everyone wished they were in their swimsuits! Charles Dearden, who was in charge of the advance publicity for J. & N. Tait in New Zealand, received an urgent cable from Frank to 'make it hot' for John Charles wherever he went or there would be no concerts.

Vivian Della Chiesa, the glamorous American soprano who had starred in *The Gypsy Baron* with John Charles in Los Angeles, was in Melbourne at the same time as he was. Having sung under Toscanini with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, she arrived for her concert tour in a blaze of publicity. During John Charles' final recital he introduced Vivian to his packed audience. Her personality immediately won the hearts of all, just as her voice captivated listeners-in on *American Melody Hour* and *Album of Familiar Music* broadcast weekly over a nationwide network in America.

Vivian and her husband fell in love with Australia, and during their visit bought hundreds of sheepskins, which they used for carpeting the whole of their lavish apartment overlooking Central Park in New York. They had the skins specially treated and lined with foam rubber, and as our feet sank into them when we were invited to 'come and admire your product', Frank and I were amazed at how luxurious they felt and looked. Vivian could not understand why Australians did not make more use of the skins.

London and New York

My first overseas trip with Frank in 1947 was a sad homecoming. My father had died six months earlier, on 16 January, aged seventy-seven, and as well as my distress at not seeing him again, I deeply regretted that he and Frank never met.

London was war-scarred and dreary, but we did not notice this at first, so warm was the welcome from our families. It was the first time Frank had seen Nevin since his serious illness during the war.¹ We celebrated our reunion with a luncheon at my sister's home in Chingford and then the evening at Covent Garden, where Nevin had engaged two boxes for us for the final night of the de Basil ballet, many members of which had performed in Australia. After the performance we joined Colonel de Basil in the Crush Bar for a farewell party before the company returned to Paris. Soon afterwards, the company disbanded. Among the guests was the Australian actor Frank Thring, who had travelled from Australia with us in the *Stratheden*. Before we left Melbourne he had been ill and his mother had asked us to look after him, as it was his first visit away from home. We enjoyed our assignment. He was an amusing companion.

Anxious to see my aunts, Frank and I went to Glasgow to spend a long weekend with them. Age had taken its toll, but they still had the energy to prepare a special high tea to welcome Frank, displaying all the family heirlooms in his honour. 'No wonder Scottish waistlines soon disappear,' he said, when he found it hard to refuse the home-baked scones and cakes, and laughed at my aunts' 'Eat up now. It mustn't be wasted.'

On one of our sightseeing tours of Paisley I pointed out to Frank my favourite restaurant where, as a schoolgirl, I had eaten pie and chips every day for lunch. That night we were having dinner at Glasgow's exclusive Central Station Hotel and, ignoring the menu, I nostalgically ordered pie and chips. It was worth doing, if only to hear the waiter's reply: 'Ach, ah can gie ye the pie but the chips I can gie ye are on the crockery.'

The D'Oyly Carte Company was playing at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow, and after we had seen *The Mikado* I met many old friends. Among them were Helen Roberts, Leslie Rands, Marjorie Eyre, John Dean and Richard Walker, all of whom Frank engaged to come to Australia for a Gilbert and Sullivan season, as well as the producer Anna Bethell, wife of Sydney Granville. After the blitz and severe rationing, Australia seemed the land of peace and plenty to them and they had no hesitation in accepting Frank's offer.

1. Early in the war he suffered a heart attack and was ill for months.



120. Frank and Viola, 1947

When we returned to London, Gracie Fields invited us to the Royal Variety Performance at the London Palladium at which she and other leading artists were giving their services to aid the Actors' Benevolent Fund. A donation of fifty pounds secured us two seats very close to the Royal Box, occupied by King George VI, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Elizabeth, who had recently become engaged to Prince Philip, and Princess Margaret.

We also saw Madge Elliott and Cyril Ritchard, Australia's best-loved musical comedy couple. They had for years entranced Australian audiences in J.C. Williamson shows, having emerged from Minnie Everett's ballet when very young. They were married in 1935, at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, to the delight of their many admirers. In London they were living in Ivor Novello's flat at the Aldwych while Ivor was touring with *Perchance to Dream*, a show Frank did not like and rechristened *Perchance to Scream*.

The lavish décor of the flat with its rich brocades and crystal chandeliers from every ceiling, including the bathroom, reflected the sparkling personality of London's most popular musical comedy idol. 'The bedroom,' said Madge, showing us an enormous seven-foot-wide bed surrounded by four mirrored walls, 'is luxurious, but rather frightening. When I wake up in the morning not looking my best I see a face I hate to think is my own.' 'But that's nothing to the fright I get when I see you multiplied by four!' laughed Cyril.

In November we left for New York, my first visit there since I had gone with the D'Oyly Carte Company in 1939. New York was shivering in a record deep freeze. Snow fell continuously for two days and was so heavy that traffic was brought to a standstill. Motorists had to leave their cars in the streets overnight until they could be dug out from under the snow. Nor did their worries end there: we were told they were fined for illegal parking! The authorities were used to dealing with crises of this sort. Regiments of mechanised trucks, bulldozers and scoops descended upon the heart of the city and worked all night in relays clearing away the snow. By morning the streets were almost back to normal and the only remaining danger was from lumps of ice falling from rooftops onto pedestrians.

Frank and I had been invited to attend a Sunday night charity concert by James Melton, a leading radio and TV star who was also big box office at the Metropolitan Opera House and one of its highest paid tenors. On arrival at the Opera House we were told by Alfred Morton, of Columbia Concerts, that Melton's appearance was in doubt, as another heavy snowstorm was forecast and to drive from his home in Connecticut would be asking for trouble. The concert was under way when onto the stage strode Melton. Attired in raccoon from head to foot, he announced exuberantly, 'I've just stepped out of my helicopter.' And that's exactly what he had done.



121. *Madge Elliott and Cyril Ritchard in Shadow Play, 1946. Photo: S.J. Hood, Sydney*



122. *Richard Crooks. Photo: Keystone Photo Service, Los Angeles*

In Connecticut, Melton had a vintage car farm, a show place that attracted many visitors. We went there and were intrigued. This was a farm with a difference. There were no cows to be milked here, no sheep to be shorn or horses to be groomed, just cars to be pulled to bits and rebuilt, engines to be oiled and brass to be polished. It was a unique and fascinating hobby and Melton never had any trouble getting labour, young vintage-car fans being prepared to work almost for the love of it. Frank negotiated with Melton to come to Australia for a concert tour, but he took seriously ill and was never able to fulfil his contract.

Mildred and Richard Crooks invited us to stay with them at their home at Buckhurst Falls, Pennsylvania. I had never met them and was anxious to do so, and Frank had not seen them since their last visit to Australia in 1939. Since then, Richard, still at the peak of his career, had had to give up singing owing to an abdominal operation which seriously impaired important muscles and affected his breathing. He was advised by a specialist to sing for only short periods, otherwise his health would suffer. Being a perfectionist and realising he would not be able to give his best if he continued concert singing, he retired. This was a tragic loss to the profession, but for Richard it was the beginning of a new life with his wife, son and daughter, uninterrupted by the hazards of touring. His tremendous vitality and zest for life, however, could not lie dormant, and when they moved to California he became absorbed in its musical culture and also acted in an advisory capacity to the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

Fortunately Richard's glorious voice can still be heard on recordings, though it is regrettable that no complete recordings were made of his *Romeo and Juliet* and other operas. Much of his early success was due to John McCormack, though unbeknown to the great Irish tenor. As McCormack got on in years, Richard noticed that whenever Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* was to be presented, McCormack would invariably cancel the performance at a few hours' notice, citing throat trouble. Richard's voice had all the required qualities, so he watched McCormack's scheduled programmes closely and was always ready to present himself for the role if he cancelled. Soon entrepreneurs knew they could call on Richard in an emergency and he was in demand for important roles. Before this he had been just a struggling student singer gratefully accepting any engagement that came his way. Singing as a professional mourner in funeral parlours had been one of his first engagements. In the 1930s, while still very young, Richard got his first big chance with the San Francisco Opera Company. Mario Chamlee, one of the great operatic singers of that time, was the principal tenor and famous in the role of Faust. Richard was warned one morning that he might have to take Chamlee's place that night. As Chamlee was a small fat man and Richard a six footer, he spent the entire day having clothes made for the part. Richard was still being pinned into his suit when Chamlee arrived at the theatre shortly before the performance was due to begin. He was about to go on stage when

he was taken ill again and had to rush to the bathroom. Richard sang the whole performance with Chamlee still sitting there. Afterwards, Chamlee's only comment was, 'If I could have gotten off the can I still could have sung it better than you.'

When Richard first came to Australia in 1936, Frank worded him up about concert platform etiquette and the importance of singing the Australian National Anthem. He told him of the embarrassment John McCormack and Italian singer Tito Schipa had caused the management on previous occasions. McCormack, a good Irishman, had refused to sing 'God Save the King' at his concerts in Sydney and Melbourne, and his indignation at being asked and the subsequent outcry caused him to cancel all future concerts and return to Ireland. Frank had asked Tito Schipa, a Fascist, to sing 'God Save the King' before his concert. He didn't do so until the end of it and then followed it with the Fascist anthem, accompanied by the Fascist salute. The audience didn't wait for him to finish, and by the time he had the hall was empty. Schipa only gave a few more concerts after the incident, as public support for him had dwindled. Having heard these stories only shortly before his first concert in the Melbourne Town Hall, Richard was somewhat unnerved by them. He knew the tune of 'God Save the King' but was hazy about the words. So he just sang 'God Save the King, God Save the King' all the way through. At interval, Frank said to him, 'I didn't ask you to save him quite so many times!'

While we were staying with Richard, he reminded us of one of the most temperamental artists Frank ever managed. This was Frances Adler, who came from Christchurch, New Zealand, and who, after going overseas, became a famous singer. From then on, Frances never looked back. She changed her name to Frances Alda and made a fortune singing in Paris, London and New York with the world's greatest artists. She sang mostly with Caruso and recorded many times with him and Toscanini.

Frances hated to be reminded that she came from New Zealand and that her name had been Adler. After a performance at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, a friend called to see her backstage and presented her with an old manuscript with 'Frances Adler' written on it. In front of Richard Crooks, Toscanini and others, she angrily tore it into shreds. Richard, who was young at the time, gathered up the pieces and put them in the wastebasket. He adored her voice but never felt quite the same again about his idol.

In 1924 Frances toured Australia and New Zealand, and her husband asked Frank to manage her concerts. Attendances were so poor that Frank felt almost ashamed to take his salary, but he had little need to feel sorry for Frances and her husband. As fast as the concerts lost money at the box office the couple made up their losses on racetracks with a horse they owned called FJA. It won them enough races to get them back to America.

One of the many shows we saw in New York on this trip was *Brigadoon*, Lerner and Loewe's first big success on Broadway. Frank bought the rights from Sam Fox, who was our host at dinner the night we saw it. Dorothy



123. Yehudi Menuhin and his family, 1952: Gerard, Diana holding Jeremy, Zamira and Krov

Stewart, our energetic New York representative, came with us. An Australian, she had been living in New York for many years and had toured the United States as a concert artist. She had an excellent knowledge of music and was also a writer of songs. One of her best known lyrics was 'Now is the Hour', the Maori farewell song, which Gracie Fields made famous. Perry Como and his band also introduced a number of Dorothy's songs to audiences. As well as looking after J.C. Williamson's interests, Dorothy represented Allan's Music Warehouse, obtaining copyrights and buying them the latest song hits. She handled similar business as well for radio station 3AW in Melbourne and the Macquarie Broadcasting Network in Sydney. Little went on in New York's musical world without Dorothy knowing about it. Her letters would arrive regularly with the latest Broadway news and cuttings of reviews immediately after opening nights. If the shows were suitable for Australia, she would negotiate for the rights and was responsible for engaging many famous artists for The Firm.

Although she had been in New York so long, Dorothy remained one hundred per cent Australian. This was more obvious to us than ever when we visited to her flat and saw in the corner of her living room an artistic gum tree in which nestled koalas. It was a sad day for J.C. Williamson Ltd when she died suddenly in 1954.

Yehudi and Diana Menuhin were on their honeymoon in New York while we were there, and Diana, who had been a classical dancer with Ballet Rambert before her marriage, was anxious to show us she could cook as well as dance, and invited us to dinner. As we approached the door of their flat, we could hear Yehudi practising the violin. Diana, in an apron, warmly welcomed us and Yehudi lay down his precious Stradivarius and kissed Frank on both cheeks. In between courses, with Diana serving the dinner she had cooked superbly, Frank discussed with Yehudi the prospect of him returning to Australia for a tour, while I found it hard to answer all Diana's queries about our country. She had practically danced around the world, but not as far as Australia. I asked her if she did yoga like Yehudi. 'Good God, no,' she replied. 'When I stand on one leg I like to get paid for it.'

Benno Moiseiwitsch was in New York giving a series of concerts at Carnegie Hall, and we had arranged to meet up with him and his wife Anita. Just as we had heard the violin on approaching the Menuhins' apartment, we expected to hear Chopin echoing down the lobby as we left the elevator of the hotel. But all was quiet and we presumed Benno had finished his practice. Anita greeted us with, 'Benno won't be long now, he's nearly finished.' 'But I don't hear him playing,' I said, showing my disappointment. 'Come with me,' she said, 'and I'll show you him practising.' She knocked gently on the door and opened it.



124. *A study of Benno Moiseiwitsch, 1946. Photo: Lionel Fitzgerald*

There was Benno sitting at a piano playing, but there was no sound. This piano, she explained, had a dummy keyboard and always went with Benno on tour so that he could practise without fear of disturbing other hotel guests or flat tenants. He welcomed Frank with, 'You old son of a gun, you're paying for dinner tonight. Don't tell me you haven't brought any money with you.' 'Not on your life,' said Frank. And so the fun went on, Jew and Scot teasing each other. Benno was the greatest gambler of all time and it wasn't long before he produced dice and tossed them—'To see who will pay for dinner.' This was typical of his sense of humour. Even had he lost, he would have insisted on paying for the meal.

Benno's tours to every part of the world included Australia and New Zealand eight times. During the Second World War, while Nazi buzz bombs hissed overhead, he gave more than 800 recitals in the British Isles and made about 200 appearances for war funds. This won for the famous Russian pianist one of Britain's highest honours—the Order of Commander of the British Empire.



125. Viola, 1950s. Photo: Broothorn Studios, Melbourne

Italian Opera and Shakespeare

In spite of the exciting theatre life that surrounded us, Frank and I found plenty of time to enjoy our children. We missed them dreadfully whenever we were overseas, and the best part of our trips was returning home to them. Sally was born in July 1949—between the Grand Opera season and another Gilbert and Sullivan tour—giving us a family of three little maids. Frank was not the domesticated type, but as a father he excelled and his patience with our small girls was remarkable, especially in view of the many work-related problems always with him.

Our marriage was rarely marred by arguments, and the only serious ones were caused by my impetuous actions. I developed a bug for buying antiques and did not exactly excel as a businesswoman! Frank did not object to me buying a bargain, but hated to think I had been exploited and never failed to tell me so. To Frank, all auction sales in the vicinity of exclusive Toorak were places of exploitation, and it was to the Toorak sales I usually went. My bidding for some rare pieces was generally curbed by Frank saying, 'It is too big for our house.' The first auction sale was in the Toorak mansion of the Colliers, and Frank accompanied me. Beautiful antiques crowded every room. A large electric fire caught my fancy. It would be just the thing for the dining room and save lighting the fire in the winter. When a friend also admired it, my desire to have it increased. Bidding was keen. Finally I got it at a price which rocked Frank, especially when we discovered that my friend and I had been bidding against each other. I hoped the warmth from the fire would appease him. Instead, it blew every fuse in the house, and we had to eat dinner by candlelight and have the house completely re-wired!

In 1948, J.C. Williamson Ltd, in association with the newly formed Education in Music and Dramatic Arts Society, gave many Australians their first taste of Grand Opera when a season of fourteen Italian operas was announced. Nevin was given the entire responsibility of forming the company and made numerous trips from London to Italy in search of talent. He had had many years' experience in handling Italian singers, who were renowned for being temperamental, passionate, artistic and often shrewd. But they all loved 'Meester Tite', which helped him in his task.

From the countless opera houses in Italy he engaged twenty-five principal artists and Bruno Nofri from the Royal Opera House in Rome as producer. Nevin's greatest achievement was the signing up of Franco Ghione, one of Italy's greatest conductors, and Manno Wolf-Ferrari, another distinguished conductor and nephew of the composer Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari. Because it was so soon after the war, Nevin had difficulty arranging the transport of so

many artists and properties, but once they were all aboard—‘Tutti sono felici e contento!’

The very mention of Italian opera revived for the Tait family happy memories of previous companies. Names like Toti Dal Monte, Granforte, Scavizzi, Arangi-Lombardi, Borgioli and Piccaluga glibly rolled off their tongues and sent Aunt Amy scuttling off to select an elegant gown for the first nights. Accommodation for the artists was a problem for The Firm, as was food. In Melbourne, free meals were offered to the opera singers at Mario’s and The Latin, two restaurants close to the theatre. With the Italian language flowing as freely as the Chianti, they became a Little Italy. If the free spaghetti did not meet with their approval, however, it was returned to the chef with uncomplimentary remarks, and I heard Mario say more than once, ‘Never again.’

This was the first grand opera season in Australia for me and I went to rehearsals with Frank. To watch Ghione working the local orchestra was an entertainment in itself. At times he would actually weep tears of despair, expecting from Australians the same passionate feeling for music that comes naturally to Italians, and when he couldn’t get results would sob ‘Mama mia’ and tear at his hair with such vigour I expected to see it coming out in handfuls.

Bruno Nofri was a past master at sorting out the hopeless-looking confusion backstage that precedes all operas on opening nights. He was also adept in handling crowd scenes such as those in *Aida* with which the season opened at His Majesty’s in Melbourne on 14 August 1948. There was no tearing of hair, no tears from Ghione that night. This most spectacular of all operas was smoothly presented in its full splendour.

Melbourne women, as they always do, rose to the occasion and their dressing would have done justice to La Scala. Few, however, were more elegantly attired than Madame Vigano, wife of the proprietor of Mario’s; Madame Ghione; and Maria Huder, a soprano with the company who was not singing in *Aida*. Her husband Aldo Ferracuti, a tenor, was one of the most colourful personalities in the company and outstanding as Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly*. There is no Italian word for ‘whisky’ and he never failed to raise a laugh when he asked Sharpless, the American consul, ‘Wheesky?’ Towards the end of the season he proudly said to Nevin, ‘My Engleesh, it is good now, eh? I can even sing in Scotch!’

For the audience to laugh in grand opera is rare, but there were laughs during *Carmen* when a chorister with a wooden leg was engaged as an extra. In Italy, *Carmen* is presented on a large scale with hundreds of extras, but because of the expense and the smaller stages this was not possible in Australia. In the final scene, when matadors, picadors and toreadors parade across the stage to enter the arena, the same man had to play double parts. A wooden leg is noticeable in tights, and when its owner appeared one moment as a picador, the next as a matador, and then as a toreador, it was only too obvious to the audience that he was a quick-change artist. It was also obvious to the management that wooden legs were out in future!



126. Viola with Isla and Ann, c. 1949



127. Isla, Sally and Ann, c. 1951



128. Ann, Sally and Isla, c. 1953



129. Viola with members of the Italian Opera Company dining at Hopetoun Road, 1948

The cry of 'Bis Bis' from the audience is a familiar one in opera houses in Italy. It signifies their delight. When the many Italians in Melbourne audiences 'bis bessed', however, one newspaper critic mistook it for hissing, and in his notice next day said how extraordinary it was that Italians had booed their own countrymen!

Several romances between members of the cast blossomed during this tour. One, which sprang up on the ship coming out to Australia, led Rina Mariosa, coloratura soprano, and Wolf-Ferrari to the altar on their arrival in Melbourne and the christening of their son in Brisbane as Giuseppe Brisbane. I have often wondered if he was still 'Brisbane' when they returned to Italy.

Rina Malatrasi, whose perfect interpretations of Cio-Cio San in *Madame Butterfly* and Mimi in *La Bohème* had thrilled her audiences, married Ferdinando Li Donni, the handsome young baritone in the company. Alvino Misciano, the lyric tenor, notable for his singing in *Tosca* and *La Bohème*, met his bride in Melbourne: Mouny Neussbaum, one of the first French models brought to Australia. Australia also captured the hearts of Leo Piccioli, who married Jean Campbell, a coloratura soprano in the company, and Rafael Lagares, dramatic tenor, who married Peggy Montgomery. On his return to Italy, Plinio Clabassi, the handsome bass of the company, whose magnificent voice was heard in the principal opera houses in Italy, married Rina Gigli,



130. Rina Malatrasi, lyric soprano, c. 1950s. Photo: Ecofotografico, Rome

daughter of the famous tenor Beniamino Gigli. Frank had hoped to cast Clabassi in the lead in *South Pacific*, but his English was not good enough.

At the conclusion of the Melbourne run, the company toured other Australian states and New Zealand, returning to Melbourne for a farewell season. We had to smile on the day the artists left for Italy. All the prima donnas looked alike in full-length black Persian lamb coats. They told us they had been unable to resist these as they were much nicer than anything they could buy in Italy, and a good investment. A year in Australia, they said, had been an experience never to be forgotten. When Frank and I visited Italy we were welcomed by many of them with open arms and requests to be able to return to Australia. A number of them did in fact return for the next grand opera season in 1955, when artists included Rina Malatrasi, Gabriela Tucci and the Australian tenor Kenneth Neate, who went on to have a brilliant career in France and Italy. Manno Wolf-Ferrari again conducted, the prima maestro being Ottavio Ziino.

In 1955 the Old Vic Company brought Shakespeare to Australia when Katharine Hepburn and Robert Helpmann appeared in *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Measure for Measure*. This was Helpmann's first visit to his native land in twenty-five years. Other distinguished players included Robin Bailey, who later returned to Australia to play Professor



131. Robert Helpmann and Katharine Hepburn in *The Merchant of Venice*, Sydney, 1955.
Photo: Noel Rubie



132. Frank and Viola at the Sydney opening of the Old Vic Company season

Higgins in *My Fair Lady*. These productions were well received by both the public and critics. Australian artist Loudon Sainthill was highly praised for the settings and costumes he designed, and the only criticism was levelled at Katharine Hepburn's American accent. One critic said she was still very much the movie actress. But of her and Robert Helpmann, the producer Michael Benthall said, 'Katie and Bobby are two of the most professional people I know. They can do anything.'

There was no criticism from women in the audience about Katharine Hepburn's wardrobe in the role of Portia, although her appearance would have been greatly enhanced had she worn make-up. This she flatly refused to do, however, saying it was bad for her skin.

After the gala opening of *The Merchant of Venice*, Lady Brooks, wife of the Governor of Victoria, Sir Dallas Brooks, asked if she could go to Katharine's dressing room to meet her and see her glamorous gown at close range. Frank escorted Sir Dallas and Lady Brooks backstage but there was no Miss Hepburn. Immediately the curtain had fallen she had dashed to the telephone to take a call from her close friend, film actor Spencer Tracy. When she returned, she was looking anything but glamorous, having changed into her 'zoot' suit, to the disappointment of Lady Brooks, who had to be content to see the gown at close range on its hanger.

Katharine Hepburn shied clear of crowds and public functions, but whenever she had to appear at a party she could not have been more charming. The reception given by the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Alderman P.D. 'Pat' Hills, got away to a good start when he introduced the guests of honour as 'Miss Helpmann and Mr Hepburn'! His mistake, however, did not compare with the one made by me when I introduced Sir Frank Richardson, of Cox Brothers, to a gathering as 'Mr Cox'. Quick as lightning, Sir Frank came back with 'Thank you, Mrs Williamson'. On another occasion I was welcomed as 'Mrs Jen Tait' by the Mayor of Prahran at a reception given in his council chambers to members of one of our opera companies.



133. Frank Tait, c. 1956. Photo: Allan Studios, Collingwood

A Theatrical Knight

When Frank and I left for overseas in 1956, our main objective was to see *My Fair Lady*, which had taken Broadway by storm. We had received glowing reports about it from Peggy Snow, Frank's daughter, who had become J.C. Williamson's representative in New York after Dorothy Stewart had died. Harry Strachan, then assistant general manager to Harald Bowden, had never been overseas and Frank decided he should accompany us.

In Los Angeles, we stayed with Richard and Mildred Crooks, and on the night of our arrival they took us to the home of their neighbours, Jeanette MacDonald and her husband Gene Raymond. Jeanette and Gene had a lovely Tudor house. It was fashionable at this time for film stars to build homes in the English style, but outside appearances were as far as it went. Inside they had all the latest American labour-saving devices and gadgets. Most of the stars also had a theatrette for the showing of films, and the down-filled divans were ideal for sleep if the show didn't come up to expectations! In Gene's den, the comfortable armchairs were covered with specially processed Australian lambswool, a further reminder that the Americans were making more use of this fibre for furnishings than we were. Harry had never seen a television, and when Jeanette heard this she could not get him to their set quickly enough. I don't know which excited Harry most—watching TV or meeting Jeanette, as he had long been a fan of this delightful singer.

Richard also took us to the home of Lauritz Melchior, the famous Wagnerian tenor. As our car approached his home high on a canyon, heavy iron gates opened automatically and closed after we passed through. Magnetically controlled gates and garage doors were all the craze in California, but a novelty to us. Melchior was a keen sportsman and frequently went on safari in Africa. Magnificent heads of the animals he had shot stared down at us from the walls, and their skins were under our feet as rugs. Above me were even the hindquarters of a buffalo; seeing my surprise, Melchior explained, 'It was such a beautiful creature, I had to stuff the lot.'

After Melchior retired from singing at the Met, he appeared at exclusive nightclubs where, surrounded by pretty girls in tights, he entertained the guests with light German and French songs. He wanted to come to Australia as a nightclub artist. It was very hard for Frank to explain why the great Lauritz Melchior, who had thrilled audiences in Wagnerian roles in every opera house of the world, would be out of place in the few nightclubs of Melbourne and Sydney at that time. After the death of his wife Maria, Melchior married his young secretary, who left him soon afterwards and sued him for half his money.

Frank had to leave us to keep an appointment with Danny Kaye's agent. Complications had arisen over Danny's proposed trip to Australia, and so Frank could not accompany Harry and me on our next interesting call—to Greer Garson's home.

Set in a beautiful garden with huge willow trees dipping branches into a stream, which ran through the extensive lawns, this was one of California's most luxurious mansions, and on that hot day the swimming pool near the house looked most inviting. A tall handsome Negro butler opened the door, and Greer's white-haired Irish mother greeted us with, 'Greer won't be long, she's talking on the phone to her husband who's in Texas.' Greer's husband was an oil magnate and they travelled in their own train across the desert to their properties in Texas and New Mexico.

It was half an hour before we had the pleasure of meeting Greer. She came running down the stairs with a miniature poodle yapping at her heels and bowled us over with her friendliness. She was as natural and charming as she is on the screen. Built on two levels, the house was designed so that every room opened onto the garden. Even the huge bathroom had its own patio specially designed for sunbaking in absolute privacy. By pressing a button beside the bed, Greer and her husband could draw back the curtains and bring the morning sunlight and garden into the room. Greer's husband was gadget-minded and this was one of his many installations for making life easy and pleasant. I admired a miniature wagon in the bedroom and was informed this was where Fluffy, the poodle, slept. Greer's mother told me, 'Greer pays as much attention to Fluffy's appearance as to her own. He always goes along to the hairdresser with her to have his hair combed up.'

After this pleasant interlude, our next stop was New York and a happy reunion with Peggy and her husband Davis Snow. Their penthouse on Park Avenue delighted us when, on that hot night, we found we could step onto the balcony garden blooming with flowers surrounded by miniature bamboo trees. Davis had worked for days, carrying up bags of concrete in which to set the little garden, defiantly surviving the soot and dust of the metropolis.

My Fair Lady had made such an impact that all performances were booked out for three months. Black marketeers, who had bought up blocks of tickets, were coining money by selling seats at anything up to \$80 to those who wanted them at short notice, especially tourists. We knew the reason when we saw it and agreed it was the most exciting show yet to hit Broadway. Bernard Shaw had refused to allow his play *Pygmalion* to be adapted as a musical, but he would surely have agreed that this interpretation and the music written for it after his death had more than done justice to his genius. Frank, while realising the show was a winner, was worrying about the practical side of mounting it in our theatres. He had grave doubts as to whether the two revolving stages would fit. He knew, too, that the show would have to be presented as lavishly in Australia as it had been in New York and that replacing such an expert cast as Rex Harrison, Julie Andrews and Stanley Holloway would not be easy.



134. Alec Templeton with his wife Julie

After the performance, we went backstage with Rod McLennan, an Australian playing one of the Cockneys, and the whole of the mechanics of the production was explained to Frank. The breadth and depth of the stage had to be taken into consideration and he was swiftly jotting these details down in his little notebook and comparing them with the dimensions of our own theatres. I went into one of the dressing rooms and saw the ingenious idea of hair and hat combinations. The hair was so beautifully built into the Ascot hats that when the girls put them on they looked as though they had come straight from the hairdresser. It was just too easy! The same idea was used in Australia and saved hundreds of pounds in not having to redress wigs for every performance. Neither Rex Harrison nor Julie Andrews could believe that the show, which had only been running a month, had created such worldwide interest, and when Frank mentioned Australia to them, they said, 'Let's think of England first.'

We left the theatre entranced and more than a little excited at the prospect of producing *My Fair Lady* in Australia. Our evening was made perfect when we attended a dinner party hosted by Dorothy and Oscar Hammerstein at their delightful home on 63rd Street. Dorothy Fields, co-author of *Annie Get Your Gun*, was one of the guests and her infectious sense of humour would have been an asset to any party. Richard Rodgers, Oscar's partner in creating so many sparkling musicals, and Moss Hart, their producer for many shows, plus their

wives, made up this gathering of talent. All predicted *My Fair Lady* would be a world-beater, but I doubt if anyone expected it to have a five-year run at the Mark Hellinger Theatre with several changes of cast.

While in New York, we wanted Harry Strachan to see the famous Barnum and Bailey circus at Madison Square Garden. I persuaded Frank to let us book for him as well, even though he was only interested in seeing shows which could be suitable for Australia. We booked for the matinée, as that night we had been invited to see Oscar Hammerstein's latest musical *Pipe Dream*, starring Bill Johnson and Helen Traubel, the well-known Wagnerian soprano. At the time, the trend was to introduce operatic artists into musicals. That morning, George Barker, the Tait brothers' personal accountant, cabled Frank that he would be phoning in the afternoon with important news that could not be disclosed in a cable. We thought this probably concerned Danny Kaye's proposed visit to Australia, so Frank insisted that Harry and I go to the circus while he waited for the call.

I had seen the Barnum and Bailey circus before, but found myself enjoying it just as much again and getting extra pleasure from Harry's reactions and seeing the faces of thousands of children light up as the daring performances in three rings went from one amazing act to another. But at the back of our minds all the time was that phone call. If it was about Danny Kaye, why hadn't it been put through to the office? We hoped to hear on our return to the hotel that Frank had finalised Danny's visit. When we reached our suite, Frank was sitting in an armchair and greeted us with, 'It's nothing to do with business. I'm sorry, Harry, it's private.'

My first thought was 'bad news', but when I saw Frank's eyes sparkling and the glimmer of a smile, I knew there was nothing wrong. As soon as we were alone, I excitedly asked, 'What is it?' 'You won't believe this,' said Frank, 'but I've been offered a KB. George Barker opened a confidential letter to me from the Federal Government, asking if I would accept the honour.' Suddenly I realised that it meant a title. If Frank was to be a 'Sir', I would be a 'Lady'. I couldn't believe it. We laughed, but in a more serious moment Frank said, 'I don't know if I can accept it. I've done nothing to deserve it.' 'Oh, yes you have,' I said proudly as we kissed and hugged each other. We were sworn to secrecy until the beginning of June, a few weeks hence, when the Queen's Birthday Honours would be publicly announced. That night we saw *Pipe Dream* through rose-coloured spectacles.

At the Met, for a performance of *Il Trovatore* starring Jussi Björling, we were in a box reserved for friends of the management. When we took our seats the house lights were out and we did not realise at first that we had distinguished company, none other than Fritz Kreisler, the Austrian violinist. He needed no introduction to Frank, having toured Australia for J. & N. Tait in 1925, and I felt proud when he welcomed him with obvious affection. His wife, to our annoyance, hardly stopped talking throughout the opera. We were told later that this was one of the reasons for Kreisler's sad expression.

Next we spent a weekend with the celebrated Welsh pianist Alec Templeton and his wife Julie at their home in Connecticut. It was a pleasant change after our hectic but exciting sojourn in New York. I had first met Alec and Julie in New York when I was with the D'Oyly Carte Company and had renewed the friendship when Alec visited Australia for J. & N. Tait in 1952.

Alec had been born blind, but was gifted with an inner sight which surpassed all understanding. In his own home you would never have known he was blind, and his wonderful wife was his eyes elsewhere. She was always careful never to move any furniture from its usual place and had bells of different pitches hanging on furniture and doors, their tinkling being a guide for her husband.

Alec had one of the finest record collections in America, and we added to this by taking him the recording of *My Fair Lady* we had bought in the foyer of the Mark Hellinger Theatre after the show. Alec's records were so well catalogued, he knew exactly where to find each one. He had had a special radiogram made so that he could operate it easily. One of his favourite comedians was William McCulloch, who went to school in Paisley with my mother. He badly wanted a record that McCulloch had made and which was no longer in circulation. I was able to get this and other McCulloch recordings for him by advertising in my uncle's paper, the *Paisley Daily Express*. Being old records, they were



135. Margot Fonteyn, Sydney 1957



136. Margot Fonteyn and Michael Somes—*Swan Lake pas de deux*, Act 2, 1957

heavy and breakable, and it was with a feeling of relief that I handed them over in one piece when Alec and Julie met us at Idlewild Airport.

Alec was an accomplished musician, a brilliant pianist and composer, and had perfect pitch. He was also a master of improvisation and a lover of jazz. His popular compositions included *Bach Goes to Town*, *Mozart Matriculates* and *Scarlatti Stoops to Conga*. Even the most hardened purist could not resist his unique approach to the masters. 'Bach,' he said, 'was born two hundred years before Dixieland jazz but he knew all the tricks, all the variations, and could have improvised modern jazz with the best.' Carl von Weber, in Alec's estimation, was another master of boogie woogie. He would demonstrate this by playing Weber's A-flat Sonata, pepping up the tempo to boogie woogie rhythm and improvising with the right hand. In the slow movement of Rachmaninoff's Fourth Symphony, he mischievously transformed the melody into *Three Blind Mice*. Mozart, Wagner and Brahms also sparkled with his satirical modernisations of the masters.

His Gilbert and Sullivan impressions were based on characters in the D'Oyly Carte Company, written during his 1939 American tour when he rarely missed one of our performances. He would delight us with impersonations of our singing, even to the accent. 'Viola,' he would say, 'you are so refeened but the telltale lilt of your Scottish brogue never fails to make me chuckle.' He could tell where anyone came from by their accent and he loved Scots. When we were together, he spoke nothing else.

Alec and Julie lived out of a suitcase for many months of the year, travelling extensively around the world, but the joy of returning home in the summer for a few months' rest was ever in their minds. In their sunroom, Alec would sit listening to the swish of the passing traffic, the large trucks having to change gear from G-flat to D-natural on the steep slope outside their gate. Every sound meant music to him. Birds sang in the tall pine trees and branches of the scented dogwood that wafted perfume into the air, and he knew them all by name. One of his telegrams to us contained the following verse:

*Thank you merry little choir
For your welcome wire
Always happy, no smile smiler
Than those of Sally, Ann and Isla.*

Alec died in 1963 after a long illness. I continued my friendship with Julie and visited her again in 1967. It was a happy reunion saddened only by Alec not being there.

We were in London, staying at the Savoy Hotel, when Frank's title was announced in the papers. The phone didn't stop ringing. Harry was the first to congratulate us and almost kissed Frank in his exuberance. 'It's about time,' he said; 'we're very proud of you.' It was so like Frank to simply say, 'I'm the one who has been singled out. My brothers deserve it just as much.' Nevin was as pleased as if he had received the title himself. He arranged a celebration



137. Michael Some, Viola, Margot Fonteyn and Terry Dear at a charity concert at Melbourne Town Hall, 1957



138. Sir Frank and Lady Tait, 1958

dinner for us, inviting his family and my sister and her family and making sure champagne flowed freely throughout the evening.

I was arranging a luncheon party for the following day and wanted to book a table in the grillroom at The Savoy. When the concierge asked my name, I suddenly realised I was no longer 'Mrs Tait' and hesitatingly blurted out, 'Lady Tait'. The bowing that followed was almost too much for me and I couldn't wait to repeat the performance for Frank.

How pleased I was that I had been able to make this trip and was beside Frank when he received this exciting news. I had further reason to be pleased when, going through Frank's papers after his death, I came across a copy of a letter he had written to Nevin when the trip was first suggested. 'I am far from seeking the trip for many reasons,' he wrote. 'Viola could not come at such late notice and I hate being alone. Her value to me is very great on these trips as she is *persona gratis* with so many people in the theatrical and concert business in New York.'

My first meeting with Margot Fonteyn occurred while we were in England, at a cocktail party given at Holland Park by the overseas committee of the Royal Academy of Dancing, of which she was president and I was a member. I did not realise how beautiful she was until I saw her that evening. She and her husband, Dr Robert Arias, Panamanian ambassador at the Court of St James, were going on to an official function. She was impeccably dressed and her sparkling and friendly personality was immediately felt. It was obvious that this great ballerina, the greatest since Pavlova, was basically natural and unsophisticated and devoid of any awareness of her exalted position.

Margot invited us to see her in *Swan Lake*, and after the performance Frank asked her to come to Australia. She said she would be delighted to do so. She had heard about the Borovansky Ballet Company and would like to be associated with it when she came. Nothing definite was decided immediately as Frank felt there were many problems to overcome before such a fine artist could be presented by J.C. Williamson Ltd, although he didn't realise at the time how understanding she could be of these difficulties.

We arrived back in Melbourne in time for the Olympic Games, which were being held in Australia for the first time, and for Frank to receive his knighthood. He had the option of being invested at Buckingham Palace by the Queen or at Government House, Canberra by the Australian Governor-General, Sir William Slim. He chose Canberra because he felt there was no place like home. Two other Victorians awarded a KB—Arthur Warner, member of the Legislative Council of Victoria and Minister for Transport; and Daryl Lindsay, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria—were invested on the same day. The third nominee, Norman Myer, Chairman of the Myer Emporium, could not be present unfortunately as he was ill.

Sir William and Lady Slim had staying with them several guests who had travelled out in the Queen's yacht, *Britannia*, with Prince Philip, who opened the Olympic Games. Not having witnessed an investiture outside of Buckingham Palace before, they were interested to see an Australian ceremony. This was

preceded by dinner, after which we went into the spacious drawing room for the ceremony. The Governor-General's aide-de-camp briefed each of the Knights-to-be as they stood in a row on the opposite side of the room to their wives. A royal blue cushion with gold tassels was placed at Sir William's feet, while, on another, the silver sword lay ready to be handed to him. The simplicity and dignity of the ceremony were deeply moving as each of our husbands stepped forward and knelt to receive the honour. When Sir William said, 'Arise, Sir Frank', I could hardly see him for my tears of emotion.

The ceremony over, champagne was served and congratulations exchanged. Sir William and Lady Slim were a delightful host and hostess, adding to our happiness by making us feel relaxed on an occasion that could have been marred by too much formality.

On returning to Australia, Frank also began thinking about the proposed Fonteyn visit and the possibility of her performing with the Borovansky Company. One of his major concerns was the skill of the orchestra. It had to be first class. For years Borovansky had been complaining about this and felt big improvements were necessary. Frank spoke with him about the idea of engaging the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the only orchestra in Australia he considered would do Fonteyn justice.

In the meantime, James Laurie, of James Laurie and Associates, London, a former Sydney radio announcer who had been doing publicity work for Covent Garden, had negotiated with Garnet H. Carroll, of the Princess Theatre, Melbourne, to bring out Fonteyn. But Fonteyn would only come under certain conditions, and, because of her discussion with Frank, felt she could only work with an established company such as Borovansky's. This led to Laurie negotiating with J.C. Williamson Ltd to present Fonteyn and three of the leading ballet dancers from Covent Garden—the English dancer Michael Somes, who was a frequent partner of Fonteyn's, and New Zealand's Rowena Jackson and Bryan Ashbridge. The Borovansky Company was reassembled specially for Fonteyn's visit together with its orchestra under the direction of Dudley Simpson. It had not been possible to engage the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Money poured into the box offices in Sydney when the three-week ballet season was announced. In Melbourne the bookings were just as heavy. Soon after her arrival in Sydney, in May 1957, Dame Margot was given a reception by the Royal Academy of Dancing Advisory Council, but the event at David Jones' store turned out to be much bigger than anticipated. It caused traffic jams outside the store, while inside, business came to a standstill as women climbed onto counters and anything else they could find to catch a glimpse of the famous ballerina. It was the sort of welcome usually accorded royalty. 'Nothing like this has ever happened to me before,' Dame Margot said. 'It is overwhelming.' She would not sign autographs in the normal way during her Sydney visit, but put one day aside for the signing of them at the Empire Theatre instead. As the long queue moved past her, I overheard her say, 'I'm doing big business', and when she came to the end of it, 'I'm closing up shop now.'

In both Sydney and Melbourne, Fonteyn won the love of many handicapped children when she arranged for them and students to attend two full-dress rehearsals of *Aurora's Wedding*. She asked that students be included because of the high cost of the tickets. At the rehearsals they could see her free of charge. I attended these rehearsals and they were performances I will never forget. Many of the children had to be carried from cars into the theatre and were thrilled later to recognise Michael Somes and Bryan Ashbridge on stage as the men who had helped bring them in. At each rehearsal, Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne was crammed with 2,000 adoring young people. The fact that the seating capacity was only 1,658 meant nothing. Children sat on the floor, they sat in wheelchairs in the aisles, and the atmosphere was electric with their excitement long before the curtain rose. When it did, the cheering nearly lifted the roof. It was like the final quarter of a football grand final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. You couldn't hear the orchestra. You could hear nothing but the delighted cries and clapping of the audience, which Dame Margot said gave her a greater thrill than any adult ovation ever had. But, when she started to dance, there was complete silence—just rapture written on every small upturned face.

In the final *pas de deux* with its famous fish dive, however, the children could not contain themselves until the end. Each phase was wildly applauded and, at the finish, Fonteyn and Somes took nineteen curtain calls. Dame Margot said afterwards she was thrilled more than anything by the children's keen appreciation of the dancing. 'They applauded always at the right places,' she said. 'And such cheering. We have never heard anything like Australia before. I am thrilled they loved it so much.' Borovansky said, 'The children were a truly artistic audience.'

At the civic reception for Fonteyn given by the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Sir Frank Selleck, we were surprised to learn that James Laurie was not remaining in Melbourne. It was rumoured that Garnet Carroll was about to issue a writ against him. This turned out to be no rumour. The writ was issued but there was no Laurie in Melbourne to receive it. When the case came before the Victorian Supreme Court in June, Frank and I



139. David Oistrakh, 1950s



140. Viola and Frank with David Oistrakh (centre), 1958

attended and heard the Chief Justice, Sir Edmund Herring, say that Laurie had 'fled' Victoria to escape having a writ served on him by Garnet Carroll, who was claiming half of Laurie's profits of £46,000 from the Fonteyn seasons in Sydney and Melbourne. Carroll claimed he had authorised Laurie to complete arrangements as his agent with J.C. Williamson Ltd to stage the ballets on the understanding that he (Carroll) and Laurie share the profits. J.C. Williamson Ltd were to provide the theatre, the cast apart from Fonteyn and associated artists, and receive fifty-four per cent of the first £13,000 takings each week and fifty per cent on anything more. Laurie was to pay the artists he brought out about £6,700 a week from his share of the profits, Fonteyn receiving £3,750 per week. Carroll estimated Laurie's profits would be £45,890 and he claimed £22,945 as his share. On the first day of the hearing, Justice Monahan 'froze' some of the payments of the profits and granted Carroll an interim injunction to prevent J.C. Williamson Ltd paying Laurie any of the amount due to him from the Melbourne season until the action was finally tried and decided. Despite this injunction, it was reported to the Supreme Court a week later that nearly all profits of the ballet tour had been paid to Laurie or accounted for to him. Affidavits said the season was being conducted not by J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd but by the Education in Music and Dramatic Arts Society, which paid Laurie's company his half share. The court was told Laurie was in New Zealand arranging a ballet tour to follow the Australian season.

Mr D.I. Menzies, QC for J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd told the court that EMDAS had been in operation since 1948 and had run many ballet and grand opera seasons under arrangements similar to those for the Fonteyn season. J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd was bound by its contract to act as it did and pay the money over to EMDAS, which was not bound by the injunction against J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd and could therefore pay Laurie his share of the profits. J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd paid the Society all theatre takings, and the Society paid Williamson's rent for the theatres, fees for hire of productions and management fees.

In Auckland, Laurie said he had arranged five weeks previously to visit New Zealand to promote the tour of prima ballerina Rowena Jackson. Later, Laurie went to America and Sir Edmund Herring ordered that he be brought back to Melbourne. The case was finally settled out of court. Some years later, Laurie became Fonteyn's manager.

Laurie, who had a keen eye for artistry in show business, was known to risk financial gain in the interests of artistic achievement. Artists who have worked for him have praised his generosity and kindness to them. He married Rosina Raisbeck, a dramatic soprano, who had sung at Covent Garden and played the Mother Superior in Garnet Carroll's *The Sound of Music* at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne. They had a son, but the marriage was dissolved and Laurie married a French girl from the Folies Bergère.

On Fonteyn's final night in Melbourne in July 1957, she gave a party at the Hotel Windsor where she was staying. Champagne flowed and it was a happy climax to a wonderful season. 'Let us toast the Dame in traditional fashion,' said Michael Some. 'Someone find her ballet shoes and we will drink from them.' When Dame Margot said she did not have her ballet shoes with her, Some produced his; they were filled to the brim and soon emptied as we all lined up for a mouthful. Frank had seen this custom often during Russian ballet seasons, but it was my first sip from a slippery satin slipper. So pleased were Fonteyn and Some with their first Australian tour, that on their return to London they said they wanted to have it all over again.

In 1962, James Laurie promoted another tour of Australia by Fonteyn and seven other dancers from the Royal Ballet, including David Blair, Bryan Ashbridge and Robin Haig. Thousands flocked to see them and were thrilled particularly by the dancing of Fonteyn and Blair in the *pas de deux* from *Raymonda*. Sir Frederick Ashton, who understood her depth of feeling and power of dramatic expression, had specially choreographed this for Fonteyn. Two years later, Australians again saw Fonteyn when brilliant Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev partnered her.

One of Nevin's greatest achievements was the engagement, in 1958, of the famous Russian violinist David Oistrakh, the first official visit of a Soviet to Australia. He was an expensive acquisition, not only asking £1,250 a performance, but demanding a full orchestra. This was provided by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which J.C. Williamson had asked to help back the tour on a partnership basis.



141. Frank Tait at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne during a dress rehearsal of *My Fair Lady*, 1958



142. *My Fair Lady*, Act 1, Scene 7, *Inside a club tent at Ascot*: David Gray (Freddy), Bunty Turner (Eliza), Kenneth Laird (Pickering), Ailsa Grahame (Mrs Higgins) and Robin Bailey (Higgins)



143. *My Fair Lady*, Act 1, Scene 10, *The Promenade of the Embassy*



144. *Closing night of My Fair Lady in Sydney, 14 October 1961*

The Cold War with Russia was causing much anxiety at the time, and although music transcends politics, Frank had a few qualms about the reception that Oistrakh might get. Fortunately these were dispelled when the world's greatest violinist received a standing ovation after his opening concert in Melbourne.

The sincerity of David and his wife Tamara impressed us as we got to know them, and we enjoyed their company. One night, when they were dining with us at home, David's accompanist Vladimir Yampolski gave Sally a Communist badge with Lenin on it. Sally, who was then twelve, proudly wore it to St Catherine's School on her blazer. When told by a somewhat shocked teacher that brooches were not permitted, she pinned it to the top of her sock.

David was an ardent amateur photographer. He had bought a movie camera in Hong Kong, and the only time he was not taking pictures was when he was playing the violin, sleeping or eating. After his last concert, he invited Claude Kingston, Frank and me back to the Hotel Windsor. David never ate before a concert, and at midnight we were confronted with a four-course meal, specially prepared for our enjoyment. After wining and dining so well, it was all we could do to keep awake into the early hours while David showed us his movies. His proudest pictures were those he had taken at Healesville of him and Tamara nursing koalas. We presented them with a large toy koala before they left Melbourne, and two years later, when we visited them in Moscow, Tamara was clutching it in her arms with a bunch of peony roses for me when we arrived at the airport.

It took more than two years to organise *My Fair Lady* for presentation in Australia, and our audiences saw a production every bit as good as the New York one, down to the last detail. The whole J.C. Williamson organisation was diverted to the mammoth task of preparing for the famous musical. It was with pride that they overcame the various problems and with even greater pride eventually saw the result of their efforts. Head mechanist Joe White and his staff tackled the installation of the two revolving stages. Cecil Beaton's costume designs were bought and the costumes made in The Firm's wardrobe by Lionel Henry and his augmented team. They alone cost £100,000. Never before had such a big outlay gone into a J.C. Williamson production, but it returned dividends that dwarfed even the directors' dreams.

The cast was selected in London by Nevin Tait, Harald Bowden and John McCallum, and approved by Lerner and Loewe. Heading it were the Irish colleen Bunty Turner (Eliza Doolittle) and English actors Robin Bailey (Professor Higgins), Richard Walker (Alfred P. Doolittle) and Kenneth Laird (Colonel Pickering). American producer Sam Liff, who had been associated with the show in New York, came out eight weeks before the opening to supervise production.

My Fair Lady opened at Her Majesty's, Melbourne, on 24 January 1959—and what a night! The city was in the throes of a heatwave, and the temperature in the theatre, which was not then air-conditioned, had soared to 110 degrees



145. Frank in Danny Kaye's dressing room on opening night, Sydney, 18 June 1959. Photo: Ron Berg

Fahrenheit. This led to a fantastic scene in the audience. After 'God Save the Queen' had been played and the curtain went up, the men in the audience rose as one and took off their evening jackets, the seats becoming a sea of stiff white shirts. We were in a box, and as we looked down on this spectacle, Frank said, 'The theatre must be air-conditioned as soon as possible.' Not long afterwards, it was. Sally had anticipated the heat and taken along a bottle of *eau de Cologne* with which we mopped our brows throughout the evening. The heat, while leaving the audience a bit on the limp side, did not detract from the enthusiasm for the show, but a little of that 'Rain in Spain' that was encored so often would have been welcome! When Robin Bailey appeared in clothes designed only for an English winter, it was almost too much for the onlookers. Robin said later he had felt like altering his number to 'Why can't men be like women and wear less?'

It was to Frank's credit that, to June 1962, when the running of the theatre was almost solely in his hands, the company showed a record net profit of £216,939. Of this, about £170,000 came from the trading side of the business. For this result he had mainly to thank *My Fair Lady*, The Firm's biggest profit-maker, amply repaying it for sparing no expense on production. From the time it opened in Melbourne to its closing in Sydney in May 1963, the main company played 1,730 performances with the original cast. It also broke all records in other States.

A second company was formed so that *My Fair Lady* could be seen simultaneously in Sydney and Melbourne. Further artists engaged in England for this were David Oxley, Patricia Moore, John Bascombe and David Hutchinson. They rehearsed in Melbourne, and when the original company went to Sydney the second company played in Melbourne for six months, then in Adelaide for a further long period before opening in Auckland. It also formed the nucleus of an Australian company that presented the show in South Africa. For South African theatres to present a J.C. Williamson show in its entirety was unique and a further achievement for Frank, who organised it. The Australian, New Zealand and South African tours of *My Fair Lady* totalled 2,500 performances and returned at the box office between four and five million pounds. In Australia alone, it entered its fifth year.

When Danny Kaye finally came to Australia, in mid-1959, he brought with him a great entourage from Hollywood, including at least four managers. All of them, Danny included, looked as though they had deformed feet. They were wearing 'space shoes', which Danny had promoted so well that practically every man and woman in America felt they should wear them for the good of their feet and their health generally. The man who manufactured them became a millionaire, and we suspected Danny did all right out of them too.

When Danny arrived in Sydney, Frank invited him and his party to dinner at Prunier's, but before dining, Danny wanted us to go to his hotel to see his arrival on TV during the 7.00 pm news. Entering his suite, we found one of his managers, Blueto, a huge man, lying flat on his back with his feet in the air, wagging his toes. With a Bronx accent he told us his feet were giving him hell because of Danny's insistence that they all wear 'space shoes'. 'I had no choice,' he said, 'but to have a plaster cast made of my feet and order a pair of these damn shoes.' I noticed that when we went to dinner, Danny had changed into smart crocodile shoes, while Blueto was still limping uncomfortably in those 'damn shoes'!

At the press reception that afternoon, Danny had refused alcohol and asked for the impossible—cider vinegar and honey. Such clean living impressed us greatly, and all attributed Danny's sylph-like figure and clear skin to a strict diet. Before leaving for Prunier's, however, he polished off half a glass of neat gin. 'We though you only drank cider vinegar and honey,' I said. 'Oh, honey, how could you think such a thing?' he said with a wink and a smile. 'That's my press diet.'

When arrangements were being made for Danny's visit to Australia, there was a tug-of-war between The Firm and Garnet H. Carroll, which ended in a tie. When he performed in Melbourne, Danny played at Carroll's Princess Theatre, and when in Sydney, at the Empire under the J.C. Williamson banner. Danny was appearing at the Princess at the same time that the Bolshoi Ballet was at Her Majesty's in Melbourne. Danny loved ballet. He was in fact a frustrated ballet dancer and could not resist attending one of the rehearsals. At the end of it, he hopped onto the stage, sang a song and put on a miming

act. There was no language barrier between Danny and the company. Danny's father was a Russian, his mother was Jewish, and it was no time before Danny had the dancers worshipping him and calling for encores. He was even more popular when he entertained them right royally at the Hotel Windsor with vodka and champagne.

Danny's wife Sylvia Fine wrote many of his scripts and songs, but Danny was also spontaneously funny and *ad libbed* a lot on stage. He was always playing pranks on the cast and his humour was infectious, making rehearsals a riot. He was an enormous success in Australia, the public loving his versatility.

Home and Abroad

The beginning of a new decade: music, comedy, drama, laughter and tears, commencing with a visit by one of France's most charming showmen. Australia saw Maurice Chevalier in person for the first time in 1960, not long after he had had the world at his feet for his magnificent performance in the delightful film *Gigi*, in which he starred with Leslie Caron and Louis Jourdan. Chevalier had been one of my screen idols when I was in my teens, and not for a moment did I dream that one day I would meet him. At seventy-one, he had lost none of the charm which made him famous and won him fans all over the world. But although he captivated audiences in Australia, they were not as big as anticipated, despite rave notices, and it was hard to understand why.

That he still thanked heaven for little girls was obvious when he came to our house for dinner and met our three daughters. Sally, he said, reminded him of *Gigi*. Sally, who was then ten, beamed when he kissed her on both cheeks and called her 'My *Gigi* girl'.

Chevalier confided to me that he had been asked many times, 'Do you like the Paris end of Collins Street?' 'Of course, I always reply "I love it"', he said, 'but tell me, Lady Tait, which end is it?' And the well-known twinkle returned to his eyes as he made this admission.

It was a great thrill for Isla when we announced we would be taking her with us on our trip behind the Iron Curtain. We had to wait several weeks in London before being granted visas for Moscow, which were not easy to obtain. On the Soviet plane, all the flight attendants, in our opinion, looked like Mr Krushchev and were just as broad. Another inch or two, we decided, and they would have got stuck in the narrow aisle between the seats as they served us a surprisingly delicious meal complete with vodka and caviar.

In 1960, Moscow had thirty-four theatres and seven concert halls, which were filled every night. It was the height of the opera and ballet season at the Bolshoi Theatre and we were fortunate to get seats for several performances. Seeing Italian opera, as in the case of *La Traviata*, was disappointing, as it loses a lot when sung in Russian, and in fact can be quite amusing. There were moments when I wanted to close my eyes and just listen to the superb orchestra. The soprano was large and portly, and the tenor small and slight with long blond hair, not the least like a romantic Alfredo. Violetta's hair was constantly getting in his mouth, and when he finished his top note with a word that sounded like 'swoopski', I thought he was going to swallow her wig!

Giselle, on the other hand, was the best performance of this ballet we had seen. The audience was hysterical over the prima ballerina, Natalia Makarova, who had been acclaimed the successor to Galina Ulanova, the Russian idol. We did not



146. Viola with Maurice Chevalier,
Melbourne, 1960



147. Frank, Viola and Isla in Moscow, 1960

know how to pronounce the names in Cyrillic lettering on the programme, and hesitated to ask the couple beside us, who were dressed in casual clothes and sandals, had not uttered a word, and were undemonstrative compared to the rest of the audience. 'It's no good asking them,' I said to Frank; 'they're obviously from Siberia and won't understand.' As we got up to leave, however, I heard the man say in a broad Yorkshire accent, 'Eh luv, that wasn't half bad, was it?'

Like most people in Moscow, the Oistrakhs lived in a small flat. Their grand piano almost filled the drawing room. Dinner with them usually started at 8.00 pm and we ate steadily through to midnight the special and delicious Russian dishes Tamara had prepared. Between courses, David made toast in the latest pop-up toaster they had brought from America. This and other electrical gadgets were continually fouling the electricity in the flat, wired many years before, and never failed to intrigue their many friends.

The Oistrakhs' son, Igor, a celebrated violinist like his father, was touring Russia and we did not get to meet him until later in London and Australia. Frank would have liked David and Igor to tour Australia together, but this was not possible.

Because ballet does not depend on language to be understood, it has brought more nationalities to Australia than any other branch of the theatrical profession. The language barrier, I found, could be overcome when we went



148. Viola, 1960s. Photo: John Warlow, Melbourne

backstage to compliment the dancers by talking with our heads, hands and even feet at times. For example, when the Georgian State Dance Company came from Russia in 1962, none of the dancers understood a word of English. Complimenting the doli player, I found my hands working overtime. The doli is a cylindrical drum played with the fingers, hand or two drumsticks, and, to get special effects, thimbles are worn on the fingers.

The Georgian dancers were warrior-like, being linked with the pagan rituals, the way of life and the martial spirit of their ancestors. They usually performed to the accompaniment of folk instruments or the singing of male or mixed choruses. The State Dance ensemble we saw was enlivened by combinations of the duduki (an oboe-like reed woodwind instrument), the two-bank Caucasian accordion and the doli.

Most exciting of all was the armed horseman's dance, the Mkhedruli. The legs of the dancers imitated the quick movements of horses' legs while their bodies and arms mimed the warrior cutting down the enemy with a sharp sabre—all this while they danced on their toes in unpadded boots. The tempo of this dance was so fast that, by the end of it, even the audience felt exhausted, and I heard someone behind me in the stalls say, 'The management should turn on vodka now. I could do with a little to revive me!'

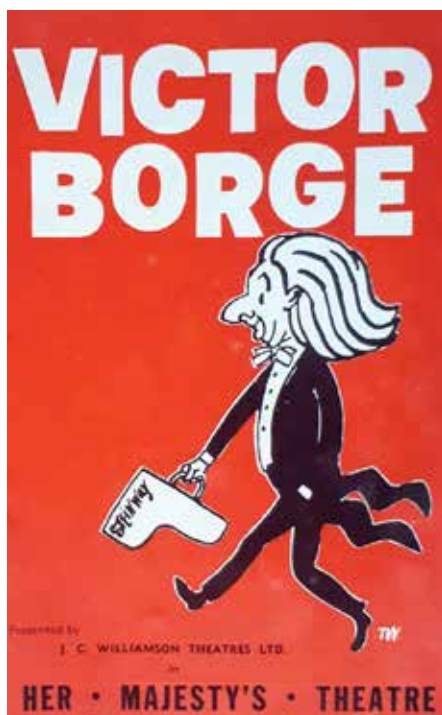
In May 1963, The Firm staged Peggy Caine's *Who'll Come A-Waltzing?*, a play first presented by amateurs at St Martin's Theatre, Melbourne, with Isla as a transistor-playing, happy-go-lucky teenager. Isla and other members of the original cast had to reaudition for their parts. Isla and Campbell Copelin were re-engaged. Dick Campion, the director was not so lucky.

It was Caine's first play and dealt with the reactions of an English migrant family to Australia. Although she was an immigrant herself, from South Africa, Peggy stressed that the play was not inspired by her own experiences.

In Melbourne, when it opened at the Comedy Theatre under the direction of Raymond Westwell, it got good reviews. Later, in Sydney, however, the reaction was not flattering. It was a charming play, but it only lasted four weeks. This was Isla's first appearance on the professional stage. She was supposed to wear a bikini, but when Frank firmly said, 'No bikini', she compromised with shirt, hipsters and bare feet. Principal parts were played by Marion Johns, Campbell Copelin, Adele Raye, Bruce Myles and Hugh Stewart.

The next attraction at the Comedy Theatre was *Goodnight, Mrs Puffin*, which opened on 12 July 1963 with the talented character actress Irene Handl in the title role. She returned three years later, in 1966, to appear in *Busybody*, and again delighted audiences with her vital and amusing personality. She made a lasting impression on all who saw her on stage or met her personally.

On her first visit, Irene was completing her novel *The Sioux*, which became a best-seller. At its launch in 1965, the speaker, who introduced Irene, unconsciously put on a Handl act when he said, 'This is Mary Handl, who has just written a book called *Goodnight, Mrs Poppins*.' It took Irene many years to complete the book and, while writing it, she always carried the manuscript in



149. Victor Borge, Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, 20 February 1962



150. Bye Bye Birdie, Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, 4 March 1961



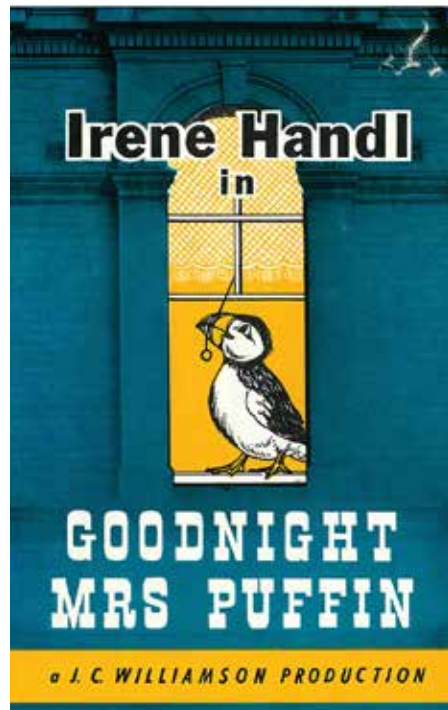
151. Who'll Come A-Waltzing?, Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, 22 May 1963



152. Who'll Come A-Waltzing?: Isla and the Duke (Hugh Stewart) twisting the night away



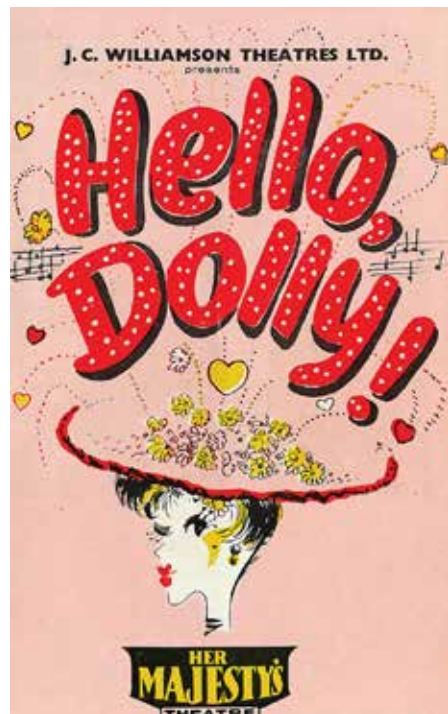
153. Inscribed photograph to Viola from Irene Handl, July 1963



154. Goodnight, Mrs Puffin, Comedy Theatre, Melbourne, 12 July 1963



155. Camelot: Tom Larson as Lancelot, Australian première, Her Majesty's Theatre, Adelaide, 30 November 1963



156. Hello, Dolly!, Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, 27 August 1965

her string bag, which was never far from her side, no matter where she was. At the theatre, in between acts, she would be seen rummaging among the foolscap pages, jotting down something she had suddenly thought of. She had an ever-active mind and re-wrote many of the scenes in *Goodnight, Mrs Puffin*.

Irene's wardrobe was usually bought from the stalls in Petticoat Lane or some second-hand shop in the back streets of the East End. She found the funny crocheted pink jumper she wore as Mrs Puffin in a pawnbroker's shop after searching for days for the right garment to create a swanky downtrodden look.

Some of the stories about Irene were not exactly bedtime ones, but they certainly made lively after-dinner conversation. She was as amusing off stage as she was on it, and very often the laughs she got were through a slip of the tongue. There was the classic example, when, opening an art show in South Yarra, Melbourne, she said she liked modern art because she loved syphilis shades. The Firm's publicity manager, Charles Dearden, who was there, said he could feel the heat from the blushes around him!

Frank and I were driving Irene to a luncheon of the Royal Commonwealth Society, when, on the way, she told us how worried she was because she had to give a speech on something she knew nothing about—'Are Women More Pampered Today than Yesterday?' Frank told her not to worry and that she could speak on whatever she wanted to. 'But I've been asked to speak about this and I've studied it,' she replied. We felt unhappy for her and agreed she should have been asked to talk on the subject she knew so much about—the theatre.

At the luncheon, Sir Bernard Evans, President of the Society, who was sitting next to me, commented, 'What a remarkable woman she is.' 'She certainly is,' I replied, 'but I can't understand why she has been asked to speak today on something she is not familiar with.' Sir Bernard looked surprised, and no wonder, as we found out later.

'My name is Irene Handl,' she told the gathering, 'but it should be George Washington Handl because I always say what I mean.' She scolded the committee for asking her to speak on a subject she knew nothing about. She had had to swot and sweat over it. She thereupon let them have her views on pampered women and her listeners rocked with laughter as she gave one of the most hilarious speeches I have ever heard. But the biggest laugh was yet to come. Charles Dearden murmured, 'Wrong luncheon.' It was the University Debating Club which had asked Irene to speak a week hence on 'Are Women More Pampered Today than Yesterday?'

One Wednesday, Irene went to her dressing room as usual to prepare for the matinée. As there was no dresser, she dressed herself as Mrs Puffin. At two o'clock, she went into the theatre to find only a darkened stage and not a soul in sight. Hurrying into Charles Dearden's office, she roared, 'Where is everybody? Surely the show's not as bad as all that!' Dearden replied, 'They're all out of step but our Irene. You've had your matinée this week.' The matinée had been held on a Monday, a public holiday, and Irene had not read the notice board informing the cast that there would not be one on Wednesday as well.



157. Ann, Viola, Sally and Isla in front of William Dargie's 1956 portrait of Frank, c. 1960

Irene was one of the most generous people, and all actors and actresses loved working with her. She enjoyed helping people in need and people liked doing things for her. While in Melbourne, she mentioned that she loved the Dandenong Ranges and, thereafter, hardly a Sunday passed without someone offering her a trip to the hills. After she had seen just about every square mile of the Dandenongs, she christened herself Irene 'Dandenongs' Handl.

The Broadway season starts in September, and producers filled with great hopes for a good harvest converge upon it. No fewer than forty shows have their premières then and it is generally known by May the following year whether or not they have made their mark with the discerning public and entrepreneurs. In Frank's opinion, the sign of a successful play was when every woman in the audience wanted to be the heroine and every man the hero, while, for musicals, a good story was essential.

It is never easy to decide on productions for Australia unless they are another *South Pacific*, *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun* or *My Fair Lady*. The high cost of presenting overseas productions, the distances between the states, and a smaller population than New York or London all have to be considered when selections are made.

As Frank grew older, he naturally took longer to make up his mind about shows, especially when responsibility for the J.C. Williamson budget rested



158. Sally and Ann, c. 1963. Photo: Southdown Press

entirely with him. At the same time, cost was not the deciding factor if he could see great artistry. Two shows he regretted not staging were *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*.

The Firm had built up such goodwill overseas that it generally got first offer of shows. By buying them, it could prevent competition while deciding whether or not to present them. This happened with *The King and I*. Frank secured the rights to prevent competition with *My Fair Lady*. When it was decided not to present *The King and I*, Garnet Carroll bought it. He also produced *The Sound of Music*. With both these shows, Frank saw the drawback of having a large number of children in the cast. Because the Education Department only allowed young children to appear three times a week, double numbers and double training were required. He overcame this objection, however, to produce *Oliver!* in 1961, and this was successful financially despite the many children in the cast.

Instead of *The Sound of Music*, Frank bought *Bye Bye Birdie*. This had teenage appeal, but although cast well with Australian artists, it did not have a very long run. In line with The Firm's policy of giving the Australian public overseas shows as soon as possible, *Bye Bye Birdie* was presented four months prior to its London opening. *Oliver!* was another first, being shown here two years before it opened in New York. American musicals *Camelot*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Funny Girl* and *Sweet Charity* were also staged in Australia before opening in London.

After record runs with *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady*, the difficulty was to buy shows of a similar standard. Every one we saw seemed flat in comparison with *My Fair Lady*. Lerner and Loewe were having a similar problem. They wanted to write *My Fair Lady*'s equal at least—and came up with *Camelot*. Frank flew to the opening in Stratford, Ontario, and reported that the show was too long; despite its merit it would need a lot of trimming before it even played New York, let alone Australia. *Camelot* was indeed streamlined for New York and had a long run, superbly cast with Richard Burton, Julie Andrews and Robert Goulet. Stars recommended for the Australian production by J.C. Williamson's producer, Raymond Westwell, were English actors Paul Daneman and Desmond Walter-Ellis, and Americans Jacquelyn McKeever and Tom Larson.

Following the opening in Adelaide, in November 1963, casting worries arose when Tom Larson arrived in Melbourne with laryngitis. After the first dress rehearsal, Frank and I went backstage to give him a few words of encouragement, as we had been told he was depressed about his performance, but he was not there. He had left the theatre without even removing his make-up. Had he delayed his departure, the dreadful tragedy that befell him on his way home that day might have been averted.

Driving his powerful American station wagon back to the house he had rented for his family in Donvale, he collided at Doncaster with another car, and two girls, aged four and five years, passengers in the other car driven by their father, were fatally injured. Larson, who was naturally very upset by the accident, was acquitted of manslaughter, but found guilty of speeding, fined £100 and disqualified from driving for three years. He never appeared in Melbourne in *Camelot*, his part being taken by his understudy, Don McPhee, who remained with the show until the end of the season. Larson and his family returned to America a few months after the accident.

Camelot was greatly enhanced by the sets and costumes designed by John Truscott, who had been associated for many years with the Little Theatre in South Yarra. Although a great artistic success, the production evidently disappointed



159. Frank at Hopetoun Road, Toorak, 1963

the public, and after the tour I only had to mention it to Frank and he would shudder at what it did to the box office. In re-writing the musical for the screen, Lerner was able to add scenes not possible in the theatre, and this helped make it a film that the world applauded.

Frank disliked 'kitchen sink' plays—those with sex and psychology themes—and rarely bought them. Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* was an exception. It was staged by The Firm throughout Australia and New Zealand and was an excellent production with a splendid cast. Although Frank had chosen it, he was still critical and said, 'Any more of this distasteful stuff and we'll empty the theatres in no time. It has a limited public.' We also disagreed about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* when we saw it in London. Frank rejected it, but it proved a money-spinner when produced by John Sumner for the Elizabethan Trust at the Union Theatre, Melbourne.

The hit of the 1964 season on Broadway was *Hello, Dolly!* starring Carol Channing. With songs by Jerry Herman, it had been hailed as one of the most tuneful musicals since *My Fair Lady*, and was gay and colourful. We saw it on our way to London in 1964 for discussions about the Sutherland opera season, and Frank had no hesitation in buying it. Having engaged Fred Hebert to produce *Hello, Dolly!*, he knew half his worries were over. Hebert had produced *The Pajama Game* for The Firm eight years previously and had since increased



160. Victor Borge with his wife Sanna and two of their children

his reputation on Broadway with several hits. When he and Agnes Doyle, J.C. Williamson's representative in New York, chose red-haired American actress, Carole Cook, for the lead, success was really assured. The author had recommended her, and the show was an immediate hit when it opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney in March 1965.

Critics raved about this glowing star in the role of the matchmaking Dolly Gallagher Levi, and they praised no less Fred Hebert's direction and Betty Pounder's skilful interpretation of American Gower Champion's choreography. Praise also went to Australians Jill Perryman, named as 'almost a show stealer', Tikki Taylor, Brian Hannan and Bruce Barry, as well as Americans Jack Goode and Bill Mullikin. The company had fifty-three players, eight more than *My Fair Lady*.

Another outstanding show we saw in New York in 1964 was Sir John Gielgud's *Hamlet* in modern dress. Richard Burton, in the lead, gave an inspired and vigorous performance, and the lack of period costumes did not detract from the production. As we left the theatre, hundreds of people caused a traffic jam in the street. They were waiting to catch a glimpse of Elizabeth Taylor, who usually sat in her husband's dressing room during his performances. A few nights later, we sat next to Sir John Gielgud at a performance of *Dylan* starring Alec Guinness, whom we met afterwards. Sir Alec surprised us with his remarkable knowledge of Australia and told us he had learned a lot about it from Googie Withers when he starred with her in *Exit the King* at the Royal Court Theatre, London and at the Edinburgh Festival the previous year.

On this trip it seemed more difficult than ever to keep pace with Frank, who at the age of eighty showed no signs of slowing down. Sometimes we would see two shows a day, and Frank would make contact with various managements as well. After a strenuous week in New York, we were glad of a restful weekend with Victor Borge and Sanna and their five children at their ranch in Connecticut. It was a pleasant stay with this charming family, although I could see Frank found it hard to relax. Opera was foremost in his thoughts, and he was anxious to complete his business in New York and get to London to discuss Joan Sutherland's tour. Victor could see Frank had much on his mind and encouraged him to talk about the pending opera season, which he was only too ready to do. He greatly appreciated Victor's understanding of the difficulties confronting him.



161. Sir Frank Tait. Photo: Conway Studios Corp, New York

The End of an Era

In 1964 Frank commenced negotiations for Joan Sutherland's 1965 tour. London did not seem the same to us without Nevin, and for Frank the subject of opera was too close to memories of his brother for his absence not to be keenly felt by him. Always in our minds, too, was the realisation of how Nevin would have revelled in managing this tour.

Our first engagement was at Covent Garden to hear Joan sing, with her husband Richard Bonyngne conducting. Her voice was thrilling as she soared through the Mad Scene from *I Puritani*, and even Frank, who was rarely over-demonstrative, showed excited enthusiasm. From then on, he spent hours negotiating with Richard and thrashing out problems at the office with Richard's associates Norman Ayrton and Charles Dorning. Responsibility for the success of this opera season weighed heavily with Frank. He alone had to make the decision to spend thousands before the curtain went up. Joan was the least of his worries. It was the nights on which she would not be singing that he had to take care of. His star would be appearing only three nights a week and there would be eight weekly performances. The supporting artists had to be world class to attract audiences, especially as Bonyngne wanted to present some of the lesser-known operas. Frank could see insurmountable problems with *Eugene Onegin* and *Coq D'Or* if Joan was not appearing in them. Bonyngne had insisted on *Eugene Onegin* as he felt it would be a vehicle for Margreta Elkins, who, being an Australian, would have appeal. Frank wanted to include *Tosca*, but the programme was well under way and it was against Bonyngne's wishes.

After spending hours at the office with Dorning and Ayrton, Frank would return home, gloomily predicting:

We can't possibly make profits. The costs are astronomical. We have gone so far now, we must not fail Joan and Richard, but we stand to lose a packet if the public don't respond. Bonyngne does not want to jeopardise the tour artistically by presenting some of the popular operas, but we know from experience the public prefers them. I cannot see *Eugene Onegin*, an opera rarely produced overseas, attracting Australians. We will deliver the goods all right, but even with an excellent cast supporting Joan, we can easily fail unless we have big names like Toti Dal Monte or Tito Gobbi to bring in the public on the nights she is not singing.

The Elizabethan Theatre Trust had also planned an opera season for 1965, and Tito Gobbi and Australian Marie Collier had been mentioned for the leading roles. We had heard Marie Collier sing *Tosca* at Covent Garden when, at short notice, she replaced Maria Callas when the great Greek singer became ill. She received a rousing ovation—one that made us proud of yet another



**ALBERTO
REMEDIOS**
Tenor



**ELIZABETH
HARWOOD**
Soprano



**LUCIANO
PAVAROTTI**
Tenor



**JOAN
SUTHERLAND**



JOHN MATHESON
Conductor

RICHARD
Artistic



THE SUTHERLAND



WILLIAM WEIBEL
Répétiteur



**JOSEPH
WARD**
Baritone



**MARGRETA
ELKINS**
Mezzo-Soprano



**CORNELIUS
OPHHOF**
Baritone

INTERNATIONAL GRAND



**JOY
MAMMEN**
Soprano



**RICHARD
CROSS**
Bass



**DOROTHY
COLE**
Contralto



**JOSEPH
ROULEAU**
Bass

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**JOHN
ALEXANDER**
Tenor



**DORIS
YARICK**
Soprano



**ANDRE
MONTAL**
Tenor

BONYNGE
Director

WILLIAMSON



NORMAN AYRTON
Director of Productions



**MONICA
SINCLAIR**
Mezzo-Soprano



**ROBERT
ALLMAN**
Baritone



MARTIN SCHEEPERS
Producer & Choreographer

OPERA COMPANY



**LAURIS
ELMS**
Contralto



**SPIRO
MALAS**
Bass



**MORAG
BEATON**
Mezzo-Soprano

THE BALLET: A feature of the Operas this season, this too has been assembled locally, and will greatly enhance the presentations.

Australian. The Trust, on hearing that The Firm had signed Joan, agreed to postpone its season and co-operate with the Sutherland–Williamson Company by providing artists for some of the minor roles and chorus. This saved The Firm thousands of dollars. Frank appointed Bonyng artistic director for the season and Norman Ayrton director of productions. Ayrton, who was a drama coach for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, had been Joan's dramatic coach. Dutchman Martin Scheepers had responsibility for the choreography and was ably assisted by Betty Pounder. Scheepers, a leading dancer with the New York City Ballet, had been choreographer for *Faust* and its leading dancer when it was presented in Philadelphia with Joan. In Australia, he produced *La Sonnambula* and *L'Elisir d'Amore*, Norman Ayrton directing the other five operas. Conductors were Richard Bonyng, Gerald Krug and Georg Tintner.

Before finalising the cast in London, Bonyng flew to Australia to audition Australian and New Zealand artists. As far as possible, local artists who had won success overseas were engaged. These included Margreta Elkins, who, since being a finalist in Mobil Quest the year it was won by Joan, had sung with the Sadler's Wells Company, the San Carlo Opera House, Naples, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden; Melbourne's Lauris Elms, who for two years had been principal contralto at Covent Garden and had sung before the Queen on four occasions; Joy Mammen, also of Melbourne, who had studied singing in Germany and sung soprano roles in important opera houses there and in Holland; baritone Ronald Maconaghie, of New Zealand, who had appeared with the Sadler's Wells Opera Company and in his own country with the Elizabethan Theatre Trust; and Clifford Grant, who had been associated with opera in Australia for ten years.

As well, opera houses in Europe and America had been combed for talent, and in the end it was a truly international company that was presented in Australia. English soprano Elizabeth Harwood sang some of the performances of *Lucia di Lammermoor*; American soprano Doris Yarick sang Marguerite in *Faust* and shared with Margreta Elkins the leads in *Eugene Onegin*. From the Met in New York came two singers who had sung opposite Joan there—John Alexander, one of the most thrilling tenors Australia had heard in recent years, and Richard Cross, the well-known bass, who had made his début with Joan in the San Francisco Opera Company's *La Sonnambula*. Luciano Pavarotti, a young Italian, came direct from Covent Garden where he had sung with Joan in *La Sonnambula* and *La Traviata*. Others in this international cast were English tenors Joseph Ward and Alberto Remedios and mezzo-soprano Monica Sinclair, Scottish contralto Morag Beaton, French-Canadian basso Joseph Rouleau, French tenor André Montal, Dutch baritone Cornelis Ophthof, Greek-American basso Spiro Malas, and Canadian contralto Dorothy Cole. When the full company arrived in Melbourne, rehearsals were taking place in every available corner of Her Majesty's Theatre.

The production of seven operas was a tremendous undertaking, and the theatre's workshops prepared for the season for more than a year. Designs for

the sets were sent from London and had to be executed with perfection to avoid delays when rehearsals started. Designer of all the costumes and scenery was Tonina Dorati, daughter of the famous Hungarian conductor Antal Dorati, well-known to Australians as conductor of the de Basil ballet. It was during his visit in 1938 that Tonina was born at the Mercy Hospital in Melbourne, and this was her first visit since she had been a babe in arms. Tonina had a marathon task with only a year to prepare seven operas and she had to have some of the set designs completed three months before rehearsals commenced so that The Firm's staff could finish them. Before the curtain rose on opening night on 10 July 1965, three operas had to be completely ready.

That first night of *Lucia di Lammermoor* was a triumph for all, from Joan down to the humblest of those who had prepared for it. For Joan it was a homecoming that all stars must dream about, and for Frank it was a dream come true. Joan had had standing ovations in the greatest opera houses of the world, but she told us none had overwhelmed her like those she received from her own people this night. Never in Melbourne's memory had there been a more excited audience, never a more glittering one. Diamonds sparkled from tiaras and necklets, but nothing sparkled more brilliantly than Joan, who took the elegantly dressed audience by storm. Never had there been so many cries of 'Bravo, bravo', nor such stamping and cheering. 'Why, it's just like a footy final,'



163. Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonynghe, 1980s



164. *Sutherland–Williamson opera season, opening night in Melbourne, 13 July 1965*

said Joan at the end of twenty curtain calls—and with that remark *La Stupenda* showed she was still all-Australian, unspoiled and thrilled to be home again.

Among the mountain of flowers which filled Joan's dressing room was a red rose, her good luck charm, brought from Sydney at Richard's request by his parents, Mr and Mrs Carl Bonyng. Roses are scarce in Melbourne in July, and never at any performance had Joan been without her single red rose. There were also orchids from the Administrator of the Commonwealth of Australia, Sir Henry Abel Smith and his wife, Lady May, keen opera lovers, who had heard Joan sing at Covent Garden. With them in the audience was Lady May's

mother, Princess Alice of Athlone, a grand-daughter of Queen Victoria. The whole company was presented to them backstage after the performance, before the principals left for a reception at the Southern Cross Hotel. Frank's speech at this reception was magnificent. 'I feel very deeply not to be sharing this triumph with my brothers, who were responsible for bringing so many operas to Australia,' he said. 'We brought Melba out and I wanted to bring out Joan as my last big venture.' I have always regretted the speech was not recorded. Joan had requested that there be no pressmen or photographers at the supper party.

The next night, Sir Henry Abel Smith and Lady May invited us to an informal dinner at the Hotel Windsor, where they were staying. Joan, Richard, Googie Withers and John McCallum made up the party. Princess Alice, then eighty-three, enlivened the meal with many amusing stories and recalled seeing *Lucia di Lammermoor* played in Holland with all the male artists in kilts to their ankles! Sir Henry showed great interest in the careers of the Tait brothers and he and Frank reminisced about many old-time artists whom J. & N. Tait had brought to Australia. It was good to see Frank relaxing again and I felt his worries were over, but when *Eugene Onegin* was presented the next night it was not an encouraging turnout for one of the lesser known operas and I knew he was worrying again.

Despite the excellent line-up of artists, it was Joan people wanted to see and hear and attendances were disappointing for the operas in which she did not appear. *Semiramide*, although one of Rossini's lesser-known operas, attracted packed houses simply because Joan was in it. This was one of her best parts. John Sinclair, Melbourne *Herald* music critic, said Joan's *Semiramide* was the most exciting display of virtuoso singing ever heard in an Australian theatre. By comparison, the performance of *Lucia* was, from a singing point of view, child's play. 'One could sit in Covent Garden for a long time without hearing singing like we heard last night,' he added.

L'Elisir d'Amore, Donizetti's light opera and not well known, failed to fill the house despite its delightful music, the magnificent performance of Luciano Pavarotti, and the critics' rave notices. Many who saw it for the first time liked it so much they went again. Caruso sang in this opera in 1904 at the Metropolitan Opera House and it was one of his happiest and most popular roles. *La Traviata* drew large attendances even on the nights Joan was not singing Violetta and it was performed by Joy Mammen, proving Frank's point that the popular operas were still firm favourites.

As the season wore on, I could see the strain taking its toll of Frank. A final dress rehearsal of *Faust* had to be held on a Sunday and he insisted on going to it. In this opera, Joan sang with great dramatic power, reaching a magnificent climax in the prison scene. Frank said to me, 'There are times when there is little to choose between Joan and Melba. In the Jewel Song, Melba's lyrical quality was unforgettable, but I forget even Melba's lyrical quality when Joan sings in the prison scene.'

It was most encouraging for Frank to see the improvement in the box office during the last few weeks of the Melbourne season. Every night of the final

week was booked out, and on Joan's nights there was not even standing room. At the final matinée, Joseph Rouleau was singing Mephistopheles for the first time in Australia and Frank particularly wanted to hear him. When we arrived at the theatre, the sight of the long queue delighted Frank so much he did not mind when told our usual seats had been sold and the only ones available were at the back of the circle. We had hardly sat down, however, when Frank started to worry about the people in the queue. 'They must be told there is standing room,' he said. I reminded him the managers would have this well in hand: on the way in, Marshall Greig, the theatre manager, and Don McPhee, the company manager, had told me no one would be turned away. However, Frank hurried downstairs to make sure, and just before the curtain went up he arrived back with a broad grin and 'They're even sitting on the side steps.'

After the matinée we had little time to dress, have dinner and return to the theatre with our family for the big night ahead—the last performance in Melbourne with Joan, Pavarotti and Spiro Malas in *La Sonnambula*. It was a memorable night. Joan's brilliancy thrilled the packed house and every member of the company excelled themselves. I kept looking at Frank for the old familiar smile, which would indicate he was pleased, and my heart sank when I saw only a grim, pale face. Normally, on such an occasion, he would have gone onto the stage to thank the artists and patrons, but this time he made no move to do so. It was a relief when he rose and entered into the spirit of streamer-throwing by the audience, who went wild with enthusiasm as the curtain rose and fell during fifteen minutes of prolonged applause and the singing of 'For She's a Jolly Good Fellow'.

The most thrilling moment of all was still to come. Someone called 'Sing "Home, Sweet Home", Joan?' No second request was needed. A piano was pushed onto the stage and Richard Bonyngé sat down and struck up the old familiar tune to a house suddenly hushed and expectant. Joan sang with such feeling that when she reached the final note many of her listeners hastily brushed away the tears her emotional singing had started. Still the audience made no move to depart and again Joan sang 'Home, Sweet Home', but this time in Italian accompanied by the company and many delighted Italians in the audience. It was almost midnight when the curtain fell for the last time and a reluctant audience finally left the theatre.

After farewelling the artists backstage, Frank escorted Joan to her car—an honour always accorded a celebrity—but they could hardly make their way through the many admirers waiting to catch a last glimpse of their own prima donna. It was a beaming Joan they saw—still glowing from a public display even more affectionate than her welcome six weeks before. I felt it was Frank's proudest hour. That was his last visit to the theatre. He died a week later.

We were at Portsea. It was Monday, 23 August 1965. The sun was sparkling its farewells in a deep red haze on the still waters of Port Phillip Bay. It had been a happy day, free from all the cares and anxieties of the city. Frank and I strolled along the narrow pathway near the edge of the cliff. Arm in arm, we enjoyed



165. Opening night of the opera season: Princess Alice of Athlone, Lady May Abel Smith, Lady Potter, Sir Ian Potter, Viola Tait, Sir Henry Abel Smith and Frank Tait

the peaceful scene and discussed the various problems the year had brought us. 'I must pull out the seeds that are smothering the ti-trees and spoiling the view,' I said. 'Then you'll be able to sit in the shade of the apple tree this summer and admire the bay without having to move from your chair.' 'I've seen enough of the sea this weekend to last me until the summer holiday,' Frank said. 'I've been here three days and that is quite long enough for me when there is so much to do at the office. I should have gone back to town with Isla and Ann last night, but I didn't want to leave you and Sally here alone.' 'But,' I said, 'this rest was necessary for you before we go to Sydney for the Sutherland opening there. Surely you feel more relaxed after our quiet weekend?' We returned to the house and busied ourselves with the usual preparations for dinner. The television had broken down and a call had been placed for a repairman to come and fix it. The man duly arrived, repaired the set, and Frank saw him to the door. None of us was prepared for what happened next. There was no warning. Frank returned to the living room, and as he sat down in his chair he suffered a major heart attack. One of Sally's friends, who was staying with us, was studying medicine and was a great help in the minutes that followed, but we knew there was nothing she or any other doctor could have done to save him.

By a strange coincidence, both Her Majesty's and the Comedy Theatre in Melbourne were closed on the night of Frank's death, preparing for openings of *Hello, Dolly!* and *A Severed Head* later in the week. With the exception of the opera season, *Hello, Dolly!* was the last show he signed up. Before rehearsals started the morning after his death, conductor Noel Smith asked the orchestra and company to stand in silent tribute to Frank. On the opening night, the dress circle seats at Her Majesty's, usually occupied by Frank and myself, remained empty.

Shocked like so many others when they heard of his death, Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyng, in Adelaide with the opera company, paid Frank a tribute echoed by thousands when they said, 'Sir Frank was a really great man and contributed more to Australian culture than anyone we know. His death is a terrible blow and the only consoling thought is that he lived to see in Melbourne, his home ground, the big success of this opera season.'

Frank's funeral took place at Toorak Presbyterian Church on 26 August. It was attended by seven hundred people from all walks of life and from all parts of Australia and New Zealand. Her Majesty's and the Comedy closed until after the funeral, enabling everyone from stars to stagehands to farewell the man they loved and respected. We had been married in this church twenty-four years earlier. Another year and we would have celebrated our silver wedding.



166. Viola and Frank, August 1965

News of Frank's passing was announced in all the newspapers, and tributes poured in attesting to his remarkable achievements. In the 55th Annual Report of J.C. Williamson Ltd, the directors paid tribute to him:

It is with the profoundest regret that the Directors report the passing of their Chairman and Managing Director, Sir Frank Samuel Tait, KB. He, with his brothers, helped to establish the J.C. Williamson organisation and its advancement over the years was in no small measure due to his efforts. His influence extended well beyond The Firm and his guidance was sought by Ballet, Opera and Theatre interests throughout Australasia. His major contributions and the high standards he insisted on in the Theatre business were acknowledged when Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II conferred on him the distinguished order of Knight Bachelor.

The tributes paid him by hundreds of his personal and theatre friends indicated just what esteem he was held in by the theatre loving public. His quiet and unassuming personality endeared him to his associates and his staff throughout The Firm. We have lost a fine leader and true friend and we will ever remember the wonderful service he rendered to his Alma Mater—The Theatre.

The year after Frank's death was naturally one of readjustment for the J.C. Williamson board. For the theatrical world, many surprises were in store following dramatic scenes behind closed doors of The Firm's boardroom. There was little comfort in the knowledge that my family and I were not alone in trying to understand the business worries Frank had shouldered and sheltered us from for so many years. He had guided his many business interests safely over turbulent waters into the secure position he and his brothers had fought so hard to achieve for the benefit of The Firm and the Tait families. With his death, the theatre lost not only the last of the five Tait brothers, but a man to whom all had looked for guidance for so long.

And so began a new era, not just for The Firm, but for me also.



167. Viola at her desk, 1960s.
Photo: Adrian Boddington, Melbourne

Epilogue

With Frank's death, Viola's close association with the behind-the-scenes world of the theatre ended. The Firm was restructured, others took Frank's place, and in the male-dominated business community of the 1960s there was no opening for a woman on the board. Despite this, Viola remained a dedicated theatregoer and continued to cultivate her friendships with the many people she had met during the halcyon days with Frank.

In 1966–1967 she went overseas to visit her family in Scotland and to spend Christmas with Isla, Ann and Sally, who had gone over to Europe after their father's death. This was Viola's first trip away without Frank. While in Europe she caught up with her sister Isla, who was holidaying in Terracina, south of Rome, and visited Gracie Fields at her home in Capri. In London she did the rounds of the theatres—Googie Withers in *Getting Married* and Joan Sutherland in *La Fille du Regiment* at Covent Garden. On the trip home, she and Sally travelled via America, where they caught up with Julie Templeton. Julie subsequently accompanied them to New York and Colorado, and to Connecticut, where they spent a few days with Victor Borge and Sanna.

Back in Australia, Viola began writing in earnest, drawing on the vast Tait family archive to write the definitive story of the Tait brothers, which she called *A Family of Brothers*. Initially she employed the services of Dolly Parker, a journalist, to help her sort through the vast collection of letters, photos and company reports, but after a disagreement between the two, Dolly's place was taken by David Kendall from Heinemann. With David's assistance, the book was finally published and launched in style at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne in 1971. To this day, *A Family of Brothers* remains the principal text on the history of J. & N. Tait and J.C. Williamson Ltd.

Viola's love of research and writing now became a consuming passion, and during the next three decades she produced numerous manuscripts on all aspects of Australian theatre history, from radio and pantomime to the Sutherland–Williamson opera season, and even plays. Her thirst for information was extraordinary. She likened the discipline of writing to that of a singer training for a production.

The year 1968 saw Viola overseas again, in London to attend the marriage of her daughter Ann to Oliver Streeton, a grandson of the Australian painter Sir Arthur Streeton. While in London she took in as many shows as possible, much to the bemusement of Sally, who accompanied her. On the way home from this trip, they spent a month in Bangkok with Gordon Steege, who was stationed at the Butterworth Airbase.

In the mid-1970s, with the break-up of the Tait–Williamson empire, the sale and disposal of the company's assets began. At this time, people in general were not as aware of the importance of history as they are now, and rather than make any attempt to conserve the non-built items—such as posters and programmes, costume drawings and music scores—much of this ephemeral material was trashed. By sheer good fortune, Viola, with the help of Frank Van Straten, was able to rescue many items from being lost or destroyed, literally retrieving them from hoppers and garbage bins.

Much of this material formed the basis of the Performing Arts Museum at the Victorian Arts Centre. The museum was established in 1979, with Frank Van Straten as archivist.¹ Thanks to Viola and Frank's initiative, this collection is now one of the premier collections of its type in Australia. In fact, Viola was instrumental in the founding of the museum, having first raised the potential of establishing such a resource when interviewed on radio in the 1970s. She subsequently became a member of the advisory committee and throughout her life continued to donate items to the museum, including a collection of costume drawings that went on display in the John Truscott-designed Vic Restaurant.

Viola's love of the Arts was also evident in her encouragement of young artists. In the early 1980s, she sponsored a young singer from Sorrento, Liane Keegan. With Viola's assistance, Liane developed into a noted singer of Wagner. Viola also became a presence on many boards, including JCW Productions and the Melba Conservatorium of Music, and on the committee of the Green Room Awards Association. She was also a director of the Opera Foundation of Victoria and a patron of the Australian Women's Choir. On Australia Day, 26 January 1990, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in recognition of her services to the Performing Arts.

Viola's private life was very much consumed by her public face, with most of her spare time spent at meetings and dinners and going to the theatre. Her hectic life allowed her little time to develop close friendships. Being separated



168. Viola and Gracie Fields, Ana Capri, 1967

1. Now known as the Australian Performing Arts Collection. Frank Van Straten went on to serve as director from 1984 till 1993.

from family and friends in Great Britain, her relationship with them was often strained by distance, and occasional disagreements arose, that under different circumstances might have been laughed off as silly misunderstandings. There was a time when she was estranged from her sister Isla.

In Australia, after her marriage to Frank, she developed a close relationship with an older woman, Sylvia Letcher, or Gee as she was known. Gee had been a good friend of Frank's first wife Iris, and after Iris's death remained close to the Tait family.

In the early days, Gee and her husband Victor, who were childless, would move into the house at Hopetoun Road to look after the children when Viola and Frank were away. Gee was a surrogate parent to them: housekeeper and nurse, but much more than that, she was an integral part of the family. When Victor died in 1968, Gee and Viola became almost inseparable. Their relationship was very much that of a mother and daughter, with Gee in many ways filling the void left by the early death of Viola's dear mother.

There was another person with whom Viola shared a long friendship—Derek Nimmo. The two had first met when Derek was brought out by *The Firm* in 1968 to appear in *Charlie Girl*. During the show's long run, Derek and Viola, and Derek's wife Pat and his children, became very close. During the years that followed, Derek spent time with Viola whenever his busy schedule brought him to Australia.



169. Viola with Lady Bolte and Derek Nimmo, 1970s



170. Viola and Michael Edgley, 1971.
Photo: Herald-Sun



171. *Viola, 1971*

After a car accident in 1990, Viola suffered severe whiplash. As a result of her injuries, various pressures built up in her neck, causing bouts of considerable pain. For some time after the accident she stopped writing, and her various manuscripts were returned to her theatre basket for safe keeping.

More medical problems followed in 1996. Viola was again visiting London, this time for the celebrations at Australia House in honour of Joan Sutherland's seventieth birthday. Her daughter Isla was hosting the event for the Tait Memorial Trust, a charity she had set up in 1992 in memory of her father. Viola's daughter Ann recalls that, after this event, the family went to France to spend Christmas with Isla and her husband Julian at their château. Just after Christmas, Viola suffered a serious episode of heart failure and spent nearly three months in the private Casamance Hospital in Marseilles. Although she was eight-five years of age, the surgeon decided to operate to repair the valves in her heart.

The operation was set for 25 January, which also happens to be Robbie Burns' birthday and a day of national celebration in Scotland. The operation was a success, although for a week Viola remained in intensive care. Her daughters were distressed that the nurses and doctors spoke no English, until the doctor in charge told them, 'But there is a patient here who is a professor and he speaks English. He is recovering well in another cubicle.' Isla and Ann rushed to the gentleman's bedside. Although he had tubes coming out of him in every direction, he was still eloquent. His name was Professor Jean-Claude Crapoulet and he was a very distinguished scholar of Robbie Burns. In fact, he had just published a book on the Bard's poems and was on his way to deliver a lecture when he was struck down with a heart condition requiring immediate surgery. It was a wonderful meeting for Viola and the French professor and, as they recovered, they struck up a great friendship. Viola was a little put out that he made a quicker recovery than she did, until it was pointed out that his relatively young age (of sixty) gave her the greater handicap!

Before Professor Crapoulet was discharged from hospital he gave Viola a copy of his book, *Poésies*, with the following inscription on the inside cover:

*'Twas a weirdie kind of romance,
We met in the Casamance.
Nothing to do with Cupid's dart,
But still a matter of the heart.*

With much encouragement from family and friends, Viola was eventually persuaded to return to her beloved writing, and in 2000 work commenced on her pantomime history, *Dames, Principal Boys ... and All That*. Following the book's publication, which was lavishly launched at Her Majesty's Theatre in Melbourne on 18 April 2001, surrounded by many of her theatre friends, old and new, she grasped the momentum to finish her memoirs, which she had commenced writing in the 1960s.

On 1 November 2001, a party was held at her home in Leopold Street, South Yarra, to celebrate her ninetieth birthday. The champagne flowed and music



172. Pictures from the family album, 1970s–1990s



173. Viola with Gee and Sally, 1990s



174. Viola in the 1990s. Photo: Angus Forbes



175. At the launch of *Dames, Principal Boys ... and All That*, Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne, 18 April 2001: Isla, Ann, Olivia Streeton, Viola, Rebecca Baring, Sara Stone and Sally. Photo: Angus Forbes



176. Portrait of Viola by Anna Redwood, 1990s

filled the air. It was a glorious occasion and the perfect opportunity for family and friends to pay tribute to a wonderful and generous woman, whose love of life and naughty sense of humour had captivated all who knew her. Over the following months, however, Viola's health declined, and on 6 February 2002 she died peacefully at her home with her daughters in attendance. On St Valentine's Day, at Toorak Uniting Church, where she and Frank had been married sixty years earlier, the Reverend Canon Albert McPherson bade farewell to a great lady of the theatre in rousing Scottish style.



Viola, 2001. Photo by Mark O'Dwyer

Viola Wilson Tait

1911–2002

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