CHAPTER 3 - ETHEL KELLY - THE STAR OF SYDNEY SOCIETY

The women’s movement of the late nineteenth century created the opportunity for an increased female cultural activism, whether in the fine and applied arts, drama or musical circles. It has been observed that a generational split characterised female activism in the applied arts, and that conservative notions of Victorian womanhood affected the extent to which the message of emancipation impacted on the endeavours of women with cultural interests. Women organisers, led by the Canadian-born actress Ethel Kelly, utilised entertainments of a theatrical nature for the purposes of charitable fund-raising in the 1910s. They too exhibited a dual observance of traditional propriety and a new self-consciousness about their cultural role as women.

Propriety was in part determined by British judgements on the respectability of life in the theatre. As a result of renewed royal support for the theatre in the 1840s, commercial involvement from the 1870s, and moral reformist and feminist interest in the 1880s and ‘90s, the theatre attracted growing numbers of actors and actresses from professional or wealthy families. Reputations were nevertheless variable. At the turn of the century actresses were alternately seen as romantic (and sexual) figures, or intellectually challenging and artistic personalities. The Australian theatre, of course, evolved under different circumstances, but the frequent tours sponsored chiefly by music and theatre industry entrepreneurs in the latter half of the nineteenth century, served to transmit British standards and judgments to the colonies. Historians of the performing arts in Australia have reasoned that a division of theatrical forms thus took place, designating the ‘circus, pantomime, minstrel show’ and vaudeville ‘as popular entertainments’, and

---

‘Shakespeare, musical drama, [and] operetta’ as cultured amusements. Social perceptions of artists likewise swung between negative stereotypes of practitioners, particularly female ones, engaged in popular theatrical forms, and a respect bordering on adulation for male and female musicians, opera singers, and speech actors.

Contemporary Australian theatre histories, written with a focus on radical nationalist developments have favoured popular theatre, in which they have observed a readiness to take up Australian themes. Surveys of theatre in Australia have also acknowledged the rise of the ‘legitimate’, repertory and amateur theatre, which also, in theory, provided opportunities for local playwrights. Unlike the professional repertory theatre of Britain, ‘serious’ theatre in Australia increasingly fell into the hands of non-commercial theatrical organisations during the 1920s and 1930s. The cumulative effect of the New South Wales Amusement Tax of 1930, the Depression, and the growing popularity of the medium of film had sent the commercial theatres into decline. Initiated and championed from earlier in the century by a series of male protagonists, the repertory movement acquired increased levels of support and encouragement in the form of mostly female actor-managers who founded and directed a series of amateur theatrical organisations during the interwar period. From its inception these endeavours boasted a nationalist element. Yet another stream of theatrical activity existed in Australia at the

---


3 By the end of the 1930s, only two of the ten theatres open a decade earlier had not closed or been converted to show talking pictures, while only one new theatre had opened. See Annette Bain, ‘Brighter Days? Challenges to live theatre in the thirties’, in Jill Roe (ed.), Twentieth Century Sydney: Studies in urban and social history, (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1980), pp. 34-5; and Parsons, Companion to Theatre, p.67.

time. Conducted under the banner of philanthropy, by women occupied in the misunderstood world of charitable fund-raising, amateur theatricals constituted a method of fund-raising. Other popular methods also relied on a strongly theatrical component. The cultural impact of these activities has escaped historical scrutiny. It is this field of cultural practice as undertaken by a key figure in the charitable fund-raising community of Sydney, Ethel Kelly, that forms the chief subject of this chapter.

Charity or voluntary work, as a common occupation for middle-class women in early twentieth century Australia, had changed somewhat from Victorian philanthropy. Judith Godden has argued that in Australia, a philanthropic woman’s sphere, as a separate entity modelled on British ideals, lost much of its autonomy and declined in importance toward the end of the nineteenth century. It was increasingly replaced by the services of the professional ‘new woman’, and the state, in the care of the young and infirm. Other historians have observed that in both Britain and Australia, charity-work increasingly took the form of fund-raising. It centred on the extraction of money through the organisation of social events such as dances and dinners, or sales of feminine handicrafts through bazaars and fetes. This form of charity-work saw men, as professionals and clergymen,
commanding 'armies of rank-and-file female voluntary workers'. Executive committees consisted of men who occupied positions of influence and power in the community, while temporary bodies created to organise particular fund-raising events were comprised mostly of women. Thus the voluntary principle or philanthropic spirit originally attending the movement of middle- and upper-class women into the public realm in the name of charity, was often obscured by the essentially social nature of the work delegated to them. According to Arlene Kaplan Daniels in Invisible Careers: Women Civic Leaders from the Volunteer World, this led to the labelling of American women charity-workers as 'socialites'. Similar designations were no doubt applied to Australian women charity-workers. Perhaps as a result the cultural impact of the application of such feminine accomplishments as art, music and elocution outside the domestic sphere in the name of charity has to date been overlooked by historians. It is the task of this chapter to consider the possibility that such activities did play an important role in the development of the arts in Sydney.

The example of Ethel Kelly, an American actress, who was quickly accepted into Sydney's social elite early in the twentieth century, and dominated its fund-raising circles for two decades, offers ample room to explore the possibility that amateur theatricals staged for charity contributed significantly to the city's cultural life. As a result of the distinctions drawn between cultural forms, and traditional assumptions concerning feminine independence, the concept of an American actress obtaining the acceptance of Sydney's conservative elite, may, in itself, appear paradoxical. Careful study of the process through which Ethel Kelly, as actress and charity worker, became not only an

8 See Arlene Kaplin Daniels, Invisible Careers: Women Civic Leaders from the Volunteer World, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp.ix, xx, 100-103, for her discussion of the stereotyping of volunteers associated with social or cultural activities.
accepted member of that elite, but one of its key public figures, thus promises to shed some light on the state of the art of drama in Sydney during the second decade of the twentieth century. Comparison of Kelly’s role with those of Margaret Gordon and other women belonging to Sydney’s elite will contribute further to our understanding of the cultural ramifications of theatrical charity events and the possibility that such women offered an indirect form of patronage to the city’s nascent thespians.

The Canadian star who stayed

Ethel Kelly, as Ethel Knight Mollison, first made her appearance on the Australian stage in April 1903 in the J.C. Williamson (JCW) production of *Are You a Mason?* She held that role until she starred in *Madame Butterfly*, also staged by JCW for the opening of Her Majesty’s Theatre in Melbourne on 1 August 1903. A theatre magazine, *The Player*, reported on 15 August that the star, ‘after concluding her engagement with Williamson, purposes going to London, and not home to America’. Theatregoers may have been a little surprised therefore, when, on 29 August, Mollison married Sydney metal merchant, Thomas Herbert Kelly, while still in the Victorian capital. Ethel Kelly made her last professional appearance in October of the same year. She then appears to have retired gracefully to the sort of comfortable life that one of Sydney’s most eligible men could provide.

Ethel Kelly’s career as an actress had begun over a decade earlier in her hometown of Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. Varying accounts cast doubt on Kelly’s age, and

---

9 W. A. Crawley (ed.), *Australasian Stage Annual*, vol.5, Jan. 1904, pp.45, 46.
10 *The Player*, vol.1, no.5, 15 Aug. 1903. ML Q792.005/6, p.3.
11 *Australasian Stage Annual*, 1904, p.50. See also Martha Rutledge, ‘Kelly, Ethel Knight’, *ADB*, vol.9, pp.553-4, for general biographical details; and *The Player*, vol.1, no.7, 15 Oct. 1903, p.19.
consequently, on the exact chronology of Kelly's formative years. However, it is clear that in 1893, at no more than nineteen years of age, Ethel Knight Mollison starred in a play entitled *Mischievous Miss*, written by her and staged in Saint John by the Arthur Rehan Company. Following an earlier success in a short-story competition in which she won a cash prize, she had secretly written the play and posted it to Rehan. Her father, a cotton merchant, discovered her enterprise when Rehan arrived at his office in order to negotiate the play's production. A satire featuring local families of prominence, it was well attended and proved highly controversial. For Ethel Knight Mollison, the experience was pivotal: she had demonstrated her talents on the professional stage; she received payment in return for her time and skill; and she had become convinced that she should pursue an acting career. Following her immediate banishment to an art school in Boston, and a brief marriage to the fatally pneumonic theatrical personality, Mr Moore, Ethel launched her career as a professional, New York-based actress. She took the work seriously, a rigorous reading-habit adding depth and subtlety to her characters.

The consummation of Mollison's theatrical bent and independence of mind in the choice of a stage career combined with the fall-out of *Mischievous Miss*, caused her family great consternation. Ethel's father, William Mollison, had encouraged her acting tendencies with his wife's compliance, while Ethel's grandmother openly disapproved. *Mischievous Miss* unleashed the full fears of her 'ever gentle mother', who accused her of 'being sly and unnatural'. When Ethel's name appeared 'as actress and author ... on every hoarding and in headlines in the advertisements', her 'sedate relations were

---

12 In *Twelve Milestones*, Kelly alleged that this occurred when she was sixteen years of age. However, official documentation, as well as family information confirms that Ethel Mollison was in fact aged nineteen at the time. See Ethel Kelly, *Twelve Milestones*, (London, Brentano's Ltd, 1929); and details from Janine Arundel, interview, conducted by Jane Hunt, 6 July 1998. Cammerary, Sydney.


14 ibid., p.31.
horrified’ and ‘a section of the town cut [her] openly’. Links may have developed between the middle class women’s movement and the theatre both in Britain and America in the last few decades of the nineteenth century; ‘Society’ may have demonstrated an increased receptivity to actresses; and Ethel may have intellectually applied herself to her work, but her British Canadian grandmother, acting as if she were a ‘fat freak in a circus’, lamented Ethel’s decision to ‘paint her face and exhibit herself for money’. It is clear, then, that Mollison came from a conservative middle-class background, who had not yet accepted the notion of the ‘new woman’ and whose standards she had therefore contravened through her choice of a professional stage career.

Employed as a professional actress, after years of experience in America, and numerous starring roles, including her favourite, Katherine, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Ethel Knight Mollison thus reached Australian shores. On her arrival, together with the usual welcoming entertainments proffered to musical and theatrical celebrities, Mollison participated in a number of Society events. She had brought with her numerous introductions from a well-placed family that had finally forgiven her, and appears to have used them readily. Among the events she attended were one of Thomas Kelly’s musical afternoons held at Glenyarrah, Double Bay, in May 1903. Her picture also appeared in major newspapers, theatre and Society magazines, including *The Australian Stage Annual*.

---

15 ibid., pp.32, 33.
16 ibid., p.46. Also Arundel, interview; and Kent, ‘Image and Reality’. One American example is Elizabeth Robins, who established herself as an actress in the 1880s before moving to London. It was in London from the late 1890s that she appears to have formally engaged herself in feminist activities. However, her earlier decision to embark on a stage career despite her father’s rather advanced hopes that she would study medicine suggests persistent feminist leanings. See ‘Robins Elizabeth’, in Jennifer Uglow (compiler and editor), *Dictionary of Women’s Biography*, third edition, 1982, (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp.460-1.
17 *The British Australian and New Zealand Mail*, 4 April 1903, p.771; 30 May 1903, p.1219; and Arundel, interview.

At testifying to her popularity as an actress, and simultaneously demonstrating through it her personal refinement, *The Australasian Stage Annual* printed Ethel Knight Mollison’s comments on her craft:

> The drawbacks, hardships, and disappointments of my early career have been so fully compensated for in the joys of travel, the companionship all over the world of cultivated people, and the actual pleasure helping to entertain many people nightly, and possibly lightening, even for a moment the sorrow of any one person, that were I again at the cross roads I should choose, of all arts, my own.

> Those who seek gratification in the art of acting must not look to the public’s commendation, but strive to attain the heights, even though unrecognised, of their inner self in ambition’s most lofty ideals.

> Then externals do not worry: To know you honestly do your best brings great contentment to an artist, than to be indiscriminately praised by an unthinking multitude.19

This high-minded tribute to the joys derived from the profession of acting says much about Ethel Mollison. Despite the deliberate move into a stage career that had so dismayed members of her mother’s family, Mollison appears to have retained an awareness of the values of modesty and refinement, the type of values that her conservative upbringing was intended to instil. She also appears to have perceived the theatre as a site for the expression and celebration of those cultural values espoused by British and American culturists. As a result of the Arnoldian inspired ‘sacralisation’ of culture that had taken place by the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘American people were taught’ that ‘Eurocentric [cultural] products ... must be approached with a disciplined, knowledgeable

seriousness of purpose'. Mollison's art was meant to uplift. It was delivered to the best of her ability; it was art for art's sake. She thus simultaneously presented herself as an artist who possessed the knowledge, the skill, and the will to understand and carry out the intentions of inspired playwrights, and a respectable woman who behaved in a suitably feminine manner and avoided the self-gratifying cheapness imputed by her grandmother. That is, even as a professional actress, and despite the apparent social contradiction, Mollison sought to convey a sense of her class.

When, while on her Australian tour, Ethel Mollison met and married Thomas Herbert Kelly (1875-1948), the son of a wealthy industrialist, member of the militia, later a city alderman, and a lover of music, she gained further social credence. Although 'Bertie' Kelly and his brother William had both originally fallen for the actress, it is not surprising that, in 1903, she married the former, whose love of music and art appealed to her; 'it was a marriage of the minds'. Sydney Society readily proclaimed 'Bertie's' cultured tastes. He shared his interests with his younger brother, Frederick Septimus Kelly, who possessed noted musical abilities, and was engaged in piano studies in Germany at the time. A skilled violinist, Thomas Herbert Kelly played for enjoyment. A fellow student at Eton remembered Thomas Kelly's unusual preoccupation with his music. In Sydney, Kelly drew other Sydney-based string players into various formations for ongoing semi-regular 'At Homes', was a long-term member of the Sydney Madrigal Society, the Sydney Philharmonic Orchestra, and later a Sydney representative of the Royal College of Music. Known as a cultured and intellectual man he was later considered

---

22 Arundel, interview.
for membership of the board of trustees of the NAGNSW. Educated at Eton and Oxford during the 1890s, Thomas Kelly potentially belonged to a generation in which the ideals of the ‘male, intellectual, socially concerned and distinctly middle-class urban culture’ of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, had faded into a less earnest, status-conscious ‘fossilize[d]’ liberal culture. The businessmen, professionals, architects and artists that considered his nomination as an art gallery trustee had demonstrated a propensity to cling to artistic styles propounded by British design reformers in the 1850s and 1860s. T.H. Kelly’s own brother, Frederick described him as ‘a complete Philistine about literature and especially poetry’. Whether a cultural conservative or otherwise, Kelly’s musical talent and intellectual interests, together with his family wealth, reputed good looks and membership of fashionable clubs made him a suitable and attractive partner for the actress of British Canadian birth.

Together Ethel and Thomas Kelly established themselves at the centre of Sydney’s social and cultural life. In 1908, the Sydney Mail noted that:

Invitations have been issued by Mr and Mrs T.H. Kelly, of Glenyarrah, Double Bay, for Saturday afternoon, May 2, to hear a performance of Brahms’s “Serenade in A” and Dvoraks “Serenade in D minor”. The performance will take place in the garden. Mr and Mrs Kelly’s musical afternoons are well known, and thoroughly appreciated by their large circle of friends.

---

23 David Marr, Patrick White: A Life, (Sydney: Random House, 1991), p.36; Arundel, interview; and Rutledge, T.H. Kelly, ADB.
26 See Andrew Montana, The Art Movement in Australia: Design, Taste and Society: 1875-1900, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), pp.2-4, 13-16. Montana argued that in Victoria, the desire to erect Australia’s first national art gallery and found an associated school took more than a decade to realise. It was driven in part by a post-Gold Rush desire to establish civil society in the colony. The art gallery’s founders thus maintained a vision grounded on the classical design principles promulgated in Britain in the 1850s well into the 1870s and 1880s. As Sydney deferred to Melbourne in matters of taste the same principles were applied with an even greater tendency to anachronism and drift away from fresh European artistic directions.
28 Sydney Mail, 22 April 1908, p.1086.
Thus, Ethel Kelly became a well-known and much-loved member of Sydney’s social elite.

In 1909, the gossip column of the *Saint John Globe* reported:

> One of the most popular and prominent ladies of Sydney, Australia, is a Canadian, Mrs T.H. Kelly. She lives in a beautiful suburban residence, and is the mother of three children. The Sydney Times [?], a few months ago, said that her taste is displayed in the arrangement of her home, where beautiful things abound. She and her husband are art lovers, and are devoted to music and painting. Mr Kelly is one of the best amateur violinists in Sydney. ... Pictures of Mrs Kelly which appeared from time to time in the Sydney journals [sic] show a very beautiful woman. Mrs Kelly’s St John’s friends who knew her as Miss Ethel Mollison will be delighted to learn of her success in the Australian world.29

**The Charity-worker**

Ethel Kelly earned further admiration and respect as a result of her energetic contributions to and participation in charity work. The *Saint John Globe* continued:

> Mrs Kelly is described as a born organiser, and a literary ball which she managed some time ago is referred to in the local paper as one of the most magnificent pageants ever witnessed in Sydney Town Hall. Mrs Kelly’s genius was responsible for the gorgeousness of the costumes. The ball was in the interests of the women’s hospital, and the committee of that institution were so pleased that they made Mrs Kelly a life governor. More recently she planned a St Vincent’s ball, and her suggestion was that Australian industries should be represented by different sets, as marble, gold, silver, tin, copper, iron, coal, wool, flour, butter, sugar, wine, paper, timber, etc, etc. Her own group was marble, in which she appeared, with some of the most beautiful girls of Sydney.30

The dignified personification of butter and coal, among other things, in forms that both satisfied the participants and entertained the on-lookers would surely have required an imaginative mind and skilled hand. To have initiated and overseen such an endeavour would have done much to enhance Ethel Kelly’s reputation as an organiser. However, it was a Literary Ball arranged to raise funds for the Crown Street Women’s Hospital in

---


30 ibid.
1907 that firmly established that reputation in the first place. The scope and success of that event thus now requires attention.

Held on May 8 1907, the literary pageant established Ethel Kelly as a leading light in fund-raising circles. All expressed their surprise and delight at the flair for design and talent for organisation demonstrated by her in her role as honorary secretary of the ball committee. The *Daily Telegraph* explained that the ‘idea of having a literary pageant ball emanated from the clever brain of Mrs T.H. Kelly, ... and the result justified the foresight of that lady by proving a most attractive spectacle’.31 The committee, including Louisa Hughes, wife of Sydney’s first Lord Mayor, the wife of the first Australian prime minister Lady Barton, the poet Dorothea Mackellar, and the daughter of the Archbishop Miss Amy Mowle, was known as ‘Mrs Kelly’s committee’. Costumes designed by Kelly, and impressive for their detail attracted note, particularly the ‘Persian Garden’ set, taking the characters from an Omar Khayyam poem by that name. The sight of ‘Alderman T.H. Kelly’ dressed as Omar Khayyam himself, ‘in royal blue baggy trousers, brown bodice tunic, a blue turban and flowing white whiskers’, amused many onlookers. However, ‘[h]is spouse’s Persian dress’ which included a ring in the nose, did not please all. ‘The Omar Khayyam set was magnificent’, remarked Pippa of *The Australasian*, ‘though in many instances Beauty was sacrificed to congruity’.32 This accuracy, detail and originality extended beyond costuming, to almost every aspect of the pageant. The form of the procession itself avoided the stereotyped movement of pairs down the hall. Instead characters walked in thematically determined formations. Each group likewise used gestures for acknowledgment of the vice-regal party and the presence of onlookers

appropriate to their respective personas, and gathered in booths designed to portray the era and location from which the respective authors hailed.

Inevitably, the ball was deemed by most of those present as one of the most enjoyable and memorable events of its kind to be held in Sydney for many years. For the more reflective, it had:

woke[n] again old associations, stored the mind with new pictures of old favourites, and deepened the love and admiration that we all must feel for the great masters of literature.33

To the charity-organiser, the pageant represented the height of fund-raising success. Guests were overheard searching their memories for an event that the Literary Ball did not eclipse, only to conclude that a privately funded ball held in the Exhibition Building before the Town Hall (opened 1866) even existed was perhaps the sole possibility. It certainly offered a challenge to future promoters: ‘What can we offer in comparison? they say’.34 Through the literary pageant, Ethel Kelly had not only demonstrated her organisational abilities, her literary and artistic knowledge, and her flair for design and historical accuracy, she had opened a whole new chapter in the social and philanthropic life of Sydney. She had thus become not only a prominent figure in Sydney Society, but a leader and forerunner whose example other Society women could only hope to emulate.

The ensuing years saw Ethel Kelly establish her style firmly on Sydney’s charitable community. She organised and participated in the ‘Centuries Ball’; a fund-raising matinee featuring the Bernard Shaw play, Candida; a Cinderella Floral Ball and Carnival; fund-raising theatricals for the Bush Nursing Association, and the Sydney Stage Society; and a “Doll’s Carnival” for the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children. In 1913, the Shakespeare pageant, evoked more praise and congratulation than the Literary Ball.

33 ‘Brain-folk of great authors’, DT, 11 May 1907, n.p., cutting in KFP, 2(3), folder 1, p.9.
34 Punch, 16 May 1907, KFP 2(3). See also SMH, 9 May 1907, KFP 2(3), folder 1.
Perhaps worn out by this long, exhaustive run of fund-raising activities, the Kelly family sold Glenyarrah and moved to Bowral in the Southern Highlands in late 1913. Ethel Kelly resigned from the various permanent boards and committees to which she had belonged, and avoided participation in all special events in Sydney for a number of years. For a time it may have appeared that the era of Kelly-styled fund-raising had ended. Yet, Kelly was not idle away from the city. A letter from St Judes’ Church, Bowral, dated early 1917, conveyed thanks for the funds she had recently collected for them. This would suggest that even when away from the public eye, Ethel Kelly possessed both the will and ability to create opportunities to raise funds for a variety of causes.

The name, Ethel Kelly, returned to Sydney’s charity committee lists and programs midway through the First World War. To much acclaim, she made an appearance in a concert at the Conservatorium of Music arranged by the wife of the celebrated surgeon, Lady Maitland, in aid of the Australian Medical Corps and Artillery Brigade Comforts Fund. The concert included a selection of amateur and professional music items, among them T.H. Kelly’s quartet, and a recital of Katherine’s speech from The Taming of the Shrew by Ethel Kelly. According to the papers, Kelly’s recital proved the highlight of the evening. It was suggested that Kelly ‘could make a mint of money for any old charity if she would deign to lend her valuable assistance’.

Not surprisingly Kelly did deign to lend her assistance to a wide variety of war-related causes. One of the earliest was a Gala Matinee in aid of the France’s Day Fund, held at the Tivoli Theatre on June 26 1917. As Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, Neville Mayman of the Shakespeare Society of NSW and Ethel Kelly performed the quarrel scene...
from *The School for Scandal*, a play by the British politician, Richard Sheridan (1751-1816). Other amateur actors and musicians presented the rest of the programme, but inevitably, it was Kelly's performance that attracted most attention. The papers lauded her beauty and 'knowledge of stagecraft'. Although she now only acted for 'sweet charity's sake', one paper observed that 'her advent on the stage attracts the public like moths to a candle'.

The popular performance was repeated soon afterwards for the Actor's Association Benevolent Fund with the famed actor, Cyril Maude, replacing Mayman as Sir Peter Teazle.

A frantic succession of fund-raising activities followed. Not all involved Kelly as an actress or performer. Nor did she confine her work to large-scale balls or matinees. In early 1918 Kelly supported the plans of her local church, St Mark's, to raise money towards the Church of England Hut Fund. However, the majority of her charity work tended toward enterprises that further demonstrated her theatrical tendency. On January 29 1918, a matinee raising funds for the Women's Hospital consisted chiefly of a one-act play, *Swords and Tea*, written, directed, and starred in by Kelly. It raised close to £500.

Between June and October 1918 Kelly engineered and participated in an unprecedented series of spectacular, extraordinary and successful schemes. Included in the series was the film, *Cupid Camouflaged*, the first screening of which raised funds for the Red Cross, as well as the 'Matinee of Art and Diction' for the Italian Red Cross, and the Elizabethan Musical Water Pageant for the Jack's Day Fund.

---

38 Melbourne Punch, July 1917, n.p., cutting in KFP, 2(3), folder 2, p.60. In some instances, she also attracted fan mail. Stella Fawcett to Ethel Kelly, KFP, 2(3), folder 2, p.68.


Both the amateur film and the water pageant belong to separate discussions. As a final example of the scale of the organisational feat that Kelly-style fund-raisers represented, however, and the theatrical element inevitably central to her ideas, the ‘Matinee of Art and Diction’ is particularly appropriate. It combined her knowledge of the arts with her affinity for the stage, and her perfectionist eye with her enormous energy. For weeks before the event, the papers reported on the planning and preparation undertaken by the organising committee and Kelly in particular. One reported on her ‘mad search for lutes and a curved bow for the Angelic Musicians’.\(^{42}\) Planned for 20 June, the event was to feature artistic tableaux, arranged to represent famous Italian works of art with the greatest possible fidelity. Hence, Dorothea Mackellar and other young Society women intended to depict a Botticelli group, while Kelly and her son, Charleton, planned to portray Vandyke’s portrait of the Marchesa di Brignola Sala and her child. To complete the tableaux, Kelly organised, with ‘Bertie’s’ assistance, music of an appropriate Italian period origin.\(^{43}\) In addition to the work of the old masters, Kelly arranged tableaux that created the ‘illusion of Chinese figures painted on rice paper’.\(^{44}\) An auction was also planned, in which a brooch found on the battlefields in 1914 and given to the ‘picture star’, Mary Pickford, and a bust portrait of an Italian master were among the items up for sale. A speaking tableau in which young women were to represent the towns of the British dominions given voice in Rudyard Kipling’s *Song of the Sons*, recitals from Shakespeare’s Italian plays, Kelly’s favourite speech from *The Taming of the Shrew*, and an assortment of musical items made up the remainder of the program.

Many individuals contributed to the success of the event. Various businesses donated the sets, the theatre, the promotional buttons, and their staff, in order to help

\(^{42}\) Source not cited, cutting in KFP, 2(3), folder 2, p.5.
\(^{43}\) Sources not cited, ibid.
defray the costs of production. A committee of women led by Lady Maitland shouldered much of the work. Upwards of 68 women took part in the tableaux, with the help of a few token men. Together with the musicians and actors, nearly a hundred people participated in the production. Each had to create or obtain accurate costumes. However, assistance was always available to those short of ideas, and Kelly frequently lent out scraps of lace or patterned fabric collected during her travels in order to give an additional touch of authenticity to a participant’s costume.  

When considering the originality of the idea, the precision of the tableaux, the scale of the production, and the repeated tributes in the press to the role played by Ethel Kelly, there can be no doubt that she remained central and vital to the success of the show even when assisted by J. and N. Tait’s theatrical producer, Mr A.L. Pearce. The promotional fliers read: ‘Mrs T. H. Kelly presents In Aid of Italy’s Day Fund A Matinee of Art and Diction’. The matinee’s theme and format also reflected Kelly’s idiosyncracies. Its theme hinted at an Italianate cultural leaning that the Kellys shared, which became increasingly evident during the interwar period, and it used stagecraft as a fund-raising medium. The cultural impact of such applications of the arts must now be considered, as should Kelly’s role as a cultural as opposed to charitable figure.

A Cultural Figure

It is clear from the previous examples that Ethel Kelly devoted much time and effort to charity work. Her distinctive style and creative ideas drawn from her knowledge

---

45 Arundel, interview, and cuttings in KFP, 2(3), folder 2.
46 Flier, KFP, 2(3), folder 2, p.6, and further copies of cuttings in Kelly Papers.
47 Ethel Kelly resided in Florence for eight years from 1925 (during which period she converted to Roman Catholicism). While her daughters attended finishing school, one daughter married an Italian Jewish concert pianist. T.H. Kelly became President of the Sydney Dante Alighieri Society in 1935, and in the same year they built a Tuscan-style villa at Darling Point. Jim Andrighetti discussed this aspect of the further detail in ‘The Kellys of Darling Point: Sydney Italophiles during and between the Wars’. Slide Lecture, unpublished, State Library of New South Wales, 23 Sept. 1998.
of art, literature, and particularly the theatre, defined much of the cultural fund-raising conducted in Sydney prior to and during the First World War. Her association with respected artists and collaboration with a variety of voluntary and professional cultural organisations within the context of such events may have led the public see her as more than simply a socialite, with all its cynical connotations of frivolity and insincerity. Instead, such links may have contributed to an impression of Kelly as not only a key figure in Sydney’s social and charitable circles, but also the city’s cultural community. Even before the advent of war, Kelly had made clear her support of cultural causes. This she had done in many ways. The event most likely to have established her reputation as a cultural figure in the mind of the public, however, was the Shakespeare pageant, held in aid of the Shakespeare Tercentenary Memorial Fund on 22 May 1913.

The Shakespeare Pageant emerged from a desire, among members of legal, educational, business and government circles, to befittingly acknowledge the tercentenary of the death of Shakespeare to occur in 1916. On 26 August 1912 these concerned citizens, together with representatives of the Shakespeare Society of New South Wales, formed a committee to found and oversee the Shakespeare Tercentenary Memorial Fund. A month later, the committee held its first meeting and invited ‘ladies prominent in the literary, social and artistic life of the State’ to attend and become committee members. Over the following year the new organisation’s executive committee defined its aims and set the ambitious fund-raising target of £25000. Soon a formal letterhead proclaimed its objectives:

An Elizabethan Library, with a statue, bust, or other work of sculpture, and provision in a lecture hall for Shakespearean lectures and representations; the State to provide for the housing of the Library.

---

Financial provision for the encouragement of the study of Shakespearean literature, especially among the young.

Financial provision (to the extent of one-fifth of the moneys collected, but not exceeding £3000), for the encouragement of Australian literature and dramatic art, either by means of an annual prize, to be known as the “Shakespeare Memorial Prize”, or in such other way as may hereafter be determined.49

The membership list also printed on the letterhead, reveals that neither Thomas nor Ethel Kelly initially joined the committee. They were in fact abroad at the time. As it was, like many other cultural institutions of the period, only a few women had become members of the executive committee. Inevitably Ethel Kelly became associated with the movement in the capacity of Hon. Secretary of the Shakespeare Pageant executive committee, on her return to Australia.

Conceptually, the Pageant aimed at a nostalgic recreation of Elizabethan England and a parade of Shakespearean characters. Great care was taken in the decoration of Sydney Town Hall, with ‘Shakespeare’s House’ at one end and a replica of Anne Hathaway’s cottage on the stage. These were extensive constructions; the trees surrounding the cottage reaching high enough to almost conceal the organ pipes, while recreations of an aged fence, a hedge, and, ‘clusters of holly-hocks’, disguised the edge of the stage.50 Through the extensive use of garlands, trellises and climbing roses, the decoration committee transformed the entire Town Hall into, ‘a series of old English gardens’.51 Inside the hall, it ‘seemed as if the wheels of time had been reversed’,52 and ‘the visitor had awakened once more in sleepy, lovely, historic Stratford-upon-Avon’.53

---

53 DT, 23 May 1913.
Only once did the papers attribute the success of the decorative concepts to any one person, and that individual, of course, was Ethel Kelly.

Two separate pageants comprised the evening entertainment. The first, organised by Kelly, involved Society figures. The appearance of the lone figure of William Shakespeare wandering across the great quadrangle between the two quaint buildings before he presented himself to Queen Elizabeth and her court led one journalist to use an ironically contemporary word to capture the experience; ‘an electric, life-giving current’, expressed in a ripple of applause, ran around the hall. The impression lasted only for a moment, after which, most reports agreed, the self-consciousness of the participants dispelled much of the illusion. By contrast, the second pageant organised by Hugh Ward the new managing director of J. C. Williamson, proved more convincing. Its cast of actors and actresses hailed from the Comic Opera and Fortune Hunter Companies, and included the celebrated stars of the stage, Florence Young, Lily Brayton, and Oscar Asche. The second pageant represented just two thematic groups: Julius Caesar and his court, and Antony and Cleopatra and theirs. Each group played out their parts with an ease that proved entertaining, until the pageant concluded with a waltz ‘to a modern rag-time air’. Beyond the sheer entertainment value of the pageant, and its fund-raising function, it served to remind people of the writer’s work and to assert his cultural place in their lives. It seemed clear that the ‘immortal bard still lived... in the minds and hearts not only of Englishmen, but of every lover of literature all over the world’.

The Shakespeare pageant appears to have emerged from a desire to recognise the writer as central to Australia’s literary heritage. In 1916, the Sydney entrepreneur, George

---

54 Sun, 23 May 1913.
56 SMH, n.d, KFP, p.93.
Marlow, sponsored a scheme proposed by the English actor, Allan Wilkie, to launch a touring Shakespeare company in honour of the tercentenary. Wilkie later attempted to establish an independent Shakespearean Company in Australia in the early 1920s. He found ready patronage among each state’s leading citizens and received government transport assistance in 1927. To some extent, this interest in Shakespeare corresponds to the process of cultural bifurcation that had begun half a century earlier, found particular potency in settler societies, and evoked a language of cultural distinction in late nineteenth century America. There, cultural crusaders, driven by a self-conscious Arnoldian fear of mediocrity, used Shakespearean drama to connote moral and intellectual sophistication. To Lawrence Levine the process served to ‘confer legitimacy’ on the newly claimed status of the middle class.

To Gregory Melleuish, drawing on Arnold and Coleridge, the civilising impulse sought to reconcile the drive to individual liberty with a consciousness of the common good. It was organic and host to a plurality of cultural flourishings. Culture was a process that transformed the individual into someone capable of civil behaviour. Notions of civilisation were also integrally linked with the development of nation states, hence the emphasis on culture in late nineteenth century America. The civilised state emerged from the will of ‘individuals who, having pursued culture, have reached a condition in which they are ruled by reason’. It is possible that Australian civil leaders involved in the organisation of the Shakespeare pageant had likewise placed themselves in the role of the exponents of culture, in an assertion not just of their own material status but of the moral authority attained through culture and through which they hoped to expand the

---

57 'Touring Shakespeare with government aid', in Brisbane (ed.). Entertaining Australia, p.189.
58 See Levine, Highbrow Lowlowbrow, pp.221, 226.
transforming influence of culture. Early in the century, loyalties oscillated between nation and empire, and culturists expressed a sometimes parochial sometimes provincial nationalism. 60 Yet inherent in the distinctions that they drew between the artistic and the commercial, the genuine and the mannered, the dangerously emotive and the morally improving, was the fear of mediocrity and the ideal of the responsible individual pursuit of perfection. Thus they echoed voices raised in both Britain and America in the 1870s and ‘80s and joined in the wider western process of cultural bifurcation.

Ethel Kelly, in her detailed knowledge of the work and times of Shakespeare, the skill and sacrifice evident in her organisation of the Shakespearean tribute, and her close association with other exponents of an anachronistic cultural canon thus confirmed in the eyes of her peers her own commitment to the development of a civilised nation state. Through the pageant’s linkage of the professional theatre with civil society in the context of an exposition of Shakespearean literature arranged by apparently altruistic culturists such as Ethel Kelly, the actors had been able to show themselves as skilled artists whose craft indeed enhanced the presentation of such cultural forms. Thus Ethel Kelly and the organisers had finally enhanced the prestige of the craft of acting in Sydney, two decades after theatre performers had gained increased levels of acceptance in British Society. 61

Five years later, Ethel Kelly returned to the Elizabethan theme. This time, though she worked closely with James Chalmers of the Shakespeare Society, members of the Sydney Madrigal Society, and key Conservatorium personnel, the Elizabethan Musical Water Pageant was aimed at raising funds for Jack’s Day (‘Jack’ being used as a nickname

---


for British sailors), that is, to aid the men of the British navy and their families. The exact origin of the idea is not clear. Separate sources attribute it alternately to the Conservatorium director, W. Arundel Orchard, and the actor and long-time supporter of the Shakespeare Society, Mr Neville Mayman. Regardless of such a detail, the pageant became another legend in the annals of Sydney society, in which Ethel Kelly played a central role. She once again demonstrated her willingness to co-operate with members of a variety of musical and dramatic institutions, and with other distinguished musicians.

The pageant itself featured a ferry ride from Circular Quay, and parade of characters representing Elizabethan royalty, courtiers, explorers, writers, and musicians around the Clifton Garden Baths at Mosman on the north side of the Harbour. It culminated in an address by Neptune to ‘Queen Elizabeth Kelly’ and a demonstration of his daughters’ aquatic talents. The subsequent program of entertainment featured near-authentic Elizabethan musical items. These included a twelve-piece flute ensemble, directed by Mr A.W. Arlom, to which members of the Court danced an old-fashioned guillard; a series of vocal solos; and four songs presented by the Madrigal Society, conducted by Orchard. Explanatory notes in the program confirm the authenticity of the madrigals and flute music, and suggest a heavy reliance on Shakespearean literature in the

---

52 W. Arundel Orchard wrote to Kelly confessing that, ‘[w]hen I made the suggestion to you and Mr Chalmers, I little thought that it could materialise so very brilliantly’. Orchard to Kelly, 24 Oct. 1918, in KFP, 2(3), folder 3, ‘Scrapbook 3, 1918-1919’, n.p. At a later date, the Shakespeare Society president Mr W. Jackson recalled that Neville Mayman had, ‘initiated and carried out... some of the largest movements ever attempted in this country, such as... “Jack’s Day”’. W. Jackson (pres. SSNSW) to W.J.P. Fitzgerald (Sec), 23 Aug. 1923, in Minute Book, SSNSW records 1900-1958, ML MSS 3096, box 1(2), folder 3, ‘Minutes 1922-25’, n.p.


64 The SMH noted that, ‘the twelve flautists who took part in the Galliard at the Clifton Gardens Pavilion were intended to represent the Royal Recorder Players of the Court... The performers were all students of Mr A. W. Arlom (their leader), and the fine old music by William Byrd was arranged by Mr Wilfred Arlom, and selected from his extensive collection of Elizabethan virginal music. Everyone connected with the splendid spectacular scenes gave gratuitous service’. See SMH, 19 Oct. 1918, n.p., cutting in KFP, 2(3), folder 3, p.9.
spoken portion of the pageant. Thus, despite the charitable nature of the cause, the pageant itself, much like the Shakespeare Pageant, served to expose the Sydney public, with as much accuracy as possible, to selected aspects of British culture, in the context of a glamorous Society event. Like Queen Elizabeth depicted in the pageant at the centre of her court of brave explorers and seamen, legendary writers and gifted artists, so Ethel Kelly, too, had surrounded herself with human symbols which, according to the standards of her day, were representative of cultural distinction.

Following the war and its myriad related charities, Ethel Kelly was able to devote more time to Shakespearean drama and the theatre. As a result of her involvement in the Shakespeare Society, she was able to set aside her customary role as ball committee secretary and resume her own career as an actress, albeit an unpaid one. In 1921, she appeared as Portia in the Society's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, which the Society staged in order to give a final boost to the Shakespeare Tercentenary Memorial Fund. Much was made of Kelly's acting credentials, both before and after the event. The confidence placed in her ability to approach the craft of acting in a professional manner, appears to have been justified. Over the ensuing years, none could forget Kelly's powerful rendition of Portia's speech in the final scene of the play, and she was obliged to repeat the performance on numerous occasions.

At the same time, Ethel Kelly also maintained links with the musical community of Sydney, particularly the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music (T.H. Kelly counted its first director, Henri Verbruggen among his friends), and actively promoted its interests. Under the auspices of the Conservatorium Henri Verbruggen had launched the new State Orchestra. As a result of questions concerning government funding he soon

---


66 See various cuttings, KFP, 2(3), folder 1, pp.61, 62, 67.
The loss of both a charismatic leader and valuable funds left the orchestra with an uncertain future. Concerned citizens thus formed a committee, on which Ethel Kelly shared the office of Honorary Treasurer with fellow charity woman, Margaret Gordon, and set about raising subscriptions. It was in this capacity, and with the additional social credential of her recent presentation at the English court, that Kelly made a public appeal on behalf of the State Orchestra during the interval of a concert starring the visiting Russian virtuoso violinist Jascha Heifetz. In it she pointed to the orchestra’s role in exposing Conservatorium students to ‘the concerted masterpieces of the great masters’ and the musical developments ‘of the day’. She continued on to question whether Sydney could ‘take its place amongst the cultured capitals of the world upon a diet of picture shows and vaudeville entertainments’. For the sake of the musical education of the people of New South Wales, in particular the children, she reasoned that the orchestra needed to survive. Towards this end the members of the orchestra themselves had pledged £1000. She placed the responsibility for raising the remainder of the sum required on the audience, and reminded its members of the ‘intellectual and emotional’ returns that they should seek rather than material profit. Finally, drawing on familiar exhortations to civic duty Kelly asked whether the people of Sydney would ‘falter and hold back allowing New South Wales to bow the head in musical ignominy’.

Ethel Kelly’s involvement in the organisation of an Artists’ Ball in 1923 contributes further to our understanding of her cultural affiliations. Aimed at raising funds to assist the Australian Art Exhibition in London, it is not to be confused with the original

---

67 For more information see John Carmody, ‘Verbrugghen, Henri Adrien Marie’, *ADB*, vol. 12, pp.317-8.

68 ‘Mrs T.H. Kelly’, no citation; ‘Orchestral Guarantees. Impassioned Appeal. Threatened Musical Ignomy[sic]’, paper, n.d. n.p.; and untitled paragraph, not citation, all cuttings in KFP, 2(3), folder 1, p.54; ‘Jascha Heifetz. With State Orchestra. Appeal for Permanency’, *SMH*, 4 July 1921, p.7. Sceptics wondered whether half the audience only paid attention to Kelly’s richly coloured, draped and bejewelled clothing, rather than the almost melodramatic speech.
Artists' Ball held in 1922, known for its bohemian associations and identified by Dulcie Deamer as the true dawn of the Roaring Twenties. The parochialism inherent in the notion of sending an exhibition of Australian art to London is itself instructive. Its sanitised pastorales were meant to represent a nation untouched, in Lionel Lindsay's words, by 'all the revolutionary manias of a rotted world'. It was also meant to provide a corrective influence through the symbolic absence of modern or 'stunt' art. Critics instead found that, in style and import, the exhibition displayed none of the unique spirit they had learned to associate with the Anzacs or Australian cricket players.

Ethel Kelly's views were more provincial than parochial. In a speech at the first of the ball committee meetings convened by its president, the State Governor's wife, Lady Forster, Kelly again expressed concern for the provision of educational opportunities to young Australian artists. She spoke of the need to stimulate interest in young students through the provision of opportunities to either study or exhibit abroad and thereby 'learn by the outside world's criticism, the value of their work'. She continued:

I do not suppose, if Dame Nellie Melba's glorious voice had only been heard out here, the world would have known of her: as it is, wherever Melba is heard, there, is Australia's name known, and we wish our artists to do the same propaganda. ... [W]e want to prove we can decorate our corner of the Empire as well as defend it.

Like the art establishment, Kelly's approach concerned establishing Australian cities on an even cultural footing with European centres. She believed this would result from a process of exposure to and emulation of standards set by artists and endorsed by the British middle class the previous century. The exhibition was to confirm artistically, as Melba had

---

60 Lionel Lindsay, 'Australian Art', in *The Exhibition of Australian Art in London, 1923*, (Sydney: Art in Australia Ltd, 1923), n.p.
62 'Society of Artists. Draft of Mrs Kelly's speech at Lady Forster's Meeting on Tuesday 12th June, 1923', typescript, draft in KFP, 2(3), folder 4, p.97.
musically, that Australian artists had met those standards. Notably, her speech also hinted at a sense of isolationism, but still retained a consciousness of Empire. Her views on this and later occasions suggest an affinity though not complete agreement with the art establishment, from artists and critics to trustees such as Sir James Reading Fairfax and Sir Francis Suttor (also a Vice-President of the Shakespeare Tercentenary Memorial Fund executive committee), in their apparent cultural conservatism and opposition to artistic modernism.\(^7^3\)

Yet Ethel Kelly was also opinionated and defiant. Known as a leader of fashionable Society she vigorously defended herself against, rather than apologising for, her love of luxurious clothing, and other personal criticisms derived from the stereotyping of ‘socialites’. In her charity and cultural work, she moved far beyond the conservative Victorian example of her grandmother and women such as Lady Fairfax. While she advocated causes cautiously guarded by male-dominated cultural establishments she also challenged and defied masculine reticence concerning women’s work. Her example thus highlights the interplay of social values that may appear contradictory; a supporter of the old liberal cultural position to which her husband and other civic leaders often retreated on the one hand, and a new woman on the other. Fortunately, Kelly was a multi-talented woman, and left, through her varied literary endeavours, a number of clues that might lead to a better understanding of her social role in relation to contemporaneous attitudes concerning gender, class and culture. From them we may also gain some impression of Kelly’s impact as a cultural role model.

\(^7^3\) Ethel Kelly’s views on modern art, printed in 1932, conformed to the line put forward by the above members of the artistic establishment, although when her daughter Beatrice showed an aptitude for post-impressionist art, Ethel Kelly encouraged her. See ‘Art in Europe. “Return to Sanity”. Sydney Woman’s Views’, SMH, 13 Feb. 1932, p.7. For a more complete discussion of the conservative reaction to modern art, which was linked more integrally by some to the rise of modernity itself, see chapter five, ‘Waging War on the Establishment?’ concerning Ethel Anderson’s patronage of modern artists in Sydney and chapter nine concerning Mary Alice Evatt, the first woman trustee and another enthusiastic advocate of artistic modernism.
A Role Model

In the wake of the First World War, and in the midst of general unrest, disease, and a changing imperial relationship, Sydney Society experienced some anxiety and uncertainty. Perhaps as a result, a magazine entitled Society was established in December 1921, with Donald Talbot Smith as its editor. In the first issue, Smith defended ‘Society’ against ‘the nonsense’ that branded it as ‘a pack of monopolists, a pen of individual semi-aristocrats’. He explained, ‘[i]n Sydney, the class called Society is not parasitic. It stands for no feudal order. Whatever money it spends and enjoys, it has earned’. He argued in classic liberal terms, ‘[s]ociety in a democratic state represents in short the best elements of the community’.  

It is not surprising that a defence and explanation of the role of the ‘Society Girl’ also appeared in Society later that year. Although the author equivocated on the precise definition of Society, she asserted that the term ‘Society Girl’ denoted ‘the girl of admirable character and tastes who moves among people of cultivation and refinement’. Cultivation was not about class; ‘the true Society girl is neither a freak nor a “type”, but primarily a good woman’. The defining characteristic of a Society girl was a particular type of womanliness. Genuine modesty, sincerity, and innocence, that is, physical, mental and emotional purity, as well as the discernment to recognise and shun imitators, were the desired traits of such a woman. Society membership, according to this account at least, depended on personal qualities that emphasised morality, not money or family status.

Enough evidence exists in a sufficiently diverse range of sources, to suggest that Kelly either deliberately or instinctively observed a similar set of ideals. Since her arrival in Australia in 1903, Kelly was accorded celebrity – ‘almost regal’ – status. At the theatre,

---

74 Editorial, Society; vol.1, no.1, Dec. 1921, p.3.
crowds would divide so that she could walk past. Yet, she appears to have attempted to maintain a degree of modesty and self-effacement. Her performance of Katherine’s speech at a fund-raising matinee at the Conservatorium in May 1916 met prolonged calls, which she steadfastly refused to indulge, for an encore. Kelly also repeatedly professed dislike of the idolatrous clamour of audiences ignorant of the high ideals she sought to convey through her craft. In terms of her charity work, Kelly repeatedly hailed her co-workers and their skills and dedication. Years later she explained to her daughters that she notified the press about her social doings because she relied on them, and they obliged her, for the promotion of her charity campaigns. Although Kelly ‘enjoyed prominence’, it was not for the sake of prominence itself. Performing her favourite dramatic scenes proved rewarding for their own sake and she was ‘totally unconcerned’ if her endeavours did not win social approval. Her conversion to Roman Catholicism during her eight-year sojourn in Florence from the mid-1920s certainly suggests an indifference to the opinion of Sydney Anglophiles. None of these completely demonstrate an ‘instinctive modesty’, but it does suggest that she did not seek publicity purely for personal gratification, and that her motives were in part altruistic. Further, according to one journalist, she possessed ‘splendid energy’ that was ‘magnetic’, ‘tonic’, and made ‘one feel that life and work are a great, or big game; one to be taken seriously as all games should’. This observation of the infectious nature of her character may have already been affected by the certain magic attached in the public mind to Kelly, the celebrity. Yet it points to Kelly’s possession of a personal energy, that was also privately and affectionately testified to in a greeting card suggesting that she was the engine pulling the family train along.

---

76 Arundel, interview.
78 Arundel, interview.
79 ‘Mrs Kelly Returns’, *The Home*, Sept. 1921, p.34.
80 Arundel, interview, and private papers in possession of Janine Arundel.
Hospitality, kindness, charity and sincerity were all values that Kelly encouraged in others, while she simultaneously frowned on pride and superficiality. In the surprising role of regular columnist for *Smith's Weekly* from late 1923, Kelly voiced strong disapproval concerning the vanity and jealousies bred in young women by doting parents seeking publicity for their debutantes. Although the mother of two young debutantes, it is unlikely that Kelly may have simply voiced the exasperation of one, willingly or otherwise, drawn into parental competitions. Impressed by the educationalist Winifred West, Kelly enrolled her daughters when few others dared at Frensham, Mittagong, an innovative school for girls founded by West in 1913.  

In her *Smith Weekly* column, Kelly assured every willing individual that they could take their place alongside the wealthy and influential elite, in the organisation of charity events, if they also brought with them, ‘stability of character, charm of personality and tact’. Conversely, she loathed the many who succeeded in becoming involved in charity events, yet whose failure to actively assist the cause demonstrated to her a lack of refinement and the absence of a charitable spirit. Ulterior motives revolving around the desire to acquire or maintain a high profile in Sydney Society, seemed, to her, to explain such behaviour, and proved the bane of the charity-organiser’s busy life:

> Organisers for years have been crying to committees, “Show us your faith by works” ... There is usually one horribly overworked person on every big charity function, and a handful of most capable and active lieutenants, and an army of hopeless ones, who bluntly excuse themselves by saying, “I never was any good on these things.”

---

81 A supporter of the women's movement, West aimed to train girls to 'take their share in the world's work'. See Winifred West, 'June 1st 1914', in Winifred Mary West, *Addresses and Talks*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), p.3; also Lena M. Curd, *Frensham: The First Twenty-Five Years*, (Sydney: Frensham, 1938).


She lamented that the public did not see the hidden cost ‘in energy and personal expenditure of cash’. Nor did it consider that charity functions meant for ‘the so-called leisured class’ a working day of sixteen hours.\(^4\) Indirectly Kelly countered the ‘socialite’ tag applied indiscriminately to all Society women, by highlighting the difference between vain attention-seeking social climbers and overworked women who felt a duty to serve Australian society. She shared this sense of duty with her husband, whose sense of responsibility led him to serve on the Sydney Municipal Council from 1906, to lobby strenuously to declare a hundred-foot corridor around the entire Harbour foreshore as a permanent reserve, and to found Koala Park at Pennant Hills.\(^5\) The convictions articulated by the Kellys in the early 1920s thus complemented those professed by the movement to defend and reassert the values defining ‘society’, as demonstrated in the publication of the *Society* journal. Ethel Kelly not only met the criteria, but epitomised the ideal of the ‘society woman’ as it was understood in the Australian context. As such, Kelly held an influential position. She had become part of the definition, and therefore could shift its meaning.

In light of this understanding of Ethel Kelly’s crucial role in Sydney Society, we may begin to realise the impact of her open-mindedness concerning the lot of Australian women. Of greatest importance is her argument in favour of feminine financial independence. She first became receptive to the idea when she herself won a small prize in a short story competition as a child; confirmed her taste for it when she participated in the production of *Mischievous Miss*, and pursued a fully-fledged career on the stage shortly

\(^4\) See EK, *SW*, 11 Aug. 1923, pp.22-23; ‘Marks of Interrogation’, *SW*, 12 May 1923, p.23; and ‘Society and Myth’, *SW*, 9 Dec. 1922, pp.22-23. These articles also contain a defence of ‘society’ and attempts to show the nobility of character, and purity of motive, demonstrated by the hard-working ‘ladies of leisure’ in their desire to meet the needs of the poor, the sick, and the Empire. While a very interesting topic, it goes beyond the parameters of this study to further explore the issues raised by Ethel Kelly in these articles.

\(^5\) Arundel, interview.
after that pivotal event. Although she appeared to have abandoned financial independence when she married T. H. Kelly and not to have questioned the inequality inherent in her hours of unpaid charity work, she nevertheless took advantage of opportunities open to her to earn money through her writing. With her husband’s agreement, she received a £1000 contract from Smith’s Weekly for the series of articles it printed during 1923 and 1924. She also earned some royalties through the publication of a number of books. In one of her Smith Weekly articles she argued that if a woman felt that she possessed an aptitude for non-domestic work, the woman’s husband should permit her to take up an appropriate form of employment in order to utilise her talents. She praised the example of a female doctor, Marion Thornett, who established an independent practice in North Sydney after her marriage to a fellow physician, Tom Johnson. If a woman found herself bound by domestic chores, Kelly also felt that she should receive payment from her husband for any tasks that, ‘in [her] absence, would have been given to hired helpers, [as] [m]any men marr[ied] to save paying a housekeeper’. Even before the First World War, Ethel Kelly was convinced that ‘[p]robably the happiest present-day women are those who have discovered their vocation and followed it’.

Whether professional or amateur, Ethel Kelly also praised and actively encouraged women with creative talents. Thus, she wrote in Smith’s Weekly about being ‘transport[ed] into an atmosphere of intimate charm’ on visiting Thea Proctor’s studio. It was as a result of ‘the attitude of soul that she charm[ed] and draw[ed] all those to whom life reveal[ed] itself in the finer and more precious forms of experience’.

---

86 Arundel, interview. Arundel described the eagerness expressed by Ethel Kelly in letters written to T.H.K. while she was abroad, concerning the use of her writing skills to contribute to the family income.
87 EK, ‘Should a wife draw wages?’, SW, 22 Sept. 1923, p.22., cutting in KFP, 3(3), item 1.
the stage. Kelly had ‘thrill[ed] in memory of her vibrant and lovely voice’ and praised the
‘artistic perception’ and ‘charm of manner’ that had distinguished the actress.  

She also awaited the appearance of the Frensham pupil, Kathleen Robinson, the daughter of a
wealthy pastoralist who possessed ‘great dramatic talent’, in an amateur theatrical The
Scarlet Pimpernel, held in aid of the Ryde Home for Incurables.

Thus, Ethel Kelly acted as an example of the definitive ‘society woman’ who
simultaneously worked to enlarge that definition. Accordingly, as an influential role
model, she gave credence to the art of acting, through demonstrations of her own skills
and her encouragement of others. The theatre had become an acceptable domain in which
Sydney daughters could develop and expose their talents, so long as conservative and
womanly patterns of behaviour, and an affinity for particular cultural forms, were evident.
Opportunities were initially obtained under the auspices of charitable fund-raising, but
those women who displayed talent were encouraged and applauded when they turned their
sights toward the professional stage. This process of validation of the stage as a career was
certainly limited, and had barely begun by the time that Kelly left late in 1923 to spend
eight years in Europe. However, through her example, and that of Margaret Gordon and
the Honourable Ray Pitt-Rivers, precedents were set.

Margaret Gordon, like Ethel Kelly, came to Australia as a much-loved young
woman of the stage in the early twentieth century. Unlike Kelly she came as a singer, with
the musical Parkina-Foldesley Concert Company. The Parkina-Foldesley concert season
opened in Sydney on February 14 1905. As Margaret Thomas, Gordon attracted
favourable reviews and much admiration. Although offered the starring role of Nanoya
in The Cingalee, under the auspices of J.C. Williamson’s Royal Comic Opera Company

91  ibid.
shortly after the Parkina-Foldesley tour, Thomas initially refused on the grounds that her Welsh family did not regard acting as a respectable career choice. Even during her early singing career in London, Thomas had steadfastly avoided the temptation to move into acting. On one occasion, the Gaiety Theatre manager, George Edwards, had invited her to play the lead role in his production of *Veronique.* For Thomas, however, the ‘thought of comic opera filled her with horror, and her parents would not hear of it’.

J. C. Williamson persisted in his offer until the petite Welsh singer agreed just days before her ship departed from Fremantle, its last Australian stop. Thomas proved as popular as an actress as she had as a concert performer. So successful was her acting debut, that one critic, pointing to her ‘voice of pure rich mezzo quality’, her ‘excellent enunciation’, and her ‘charming manner’, gushed, ‘Miss Margaret Thomas is an acquisition to who [sic] too much praise cannot be given’. She impressed more than just the critics - one of Sydney’s most eligible bachelors, the barrister Alexander Gordon, married her at her home town in Wales in 1906. The newly-weds then settled in Sydney’s eastern suburbs in early 1907.

Thus the social credentials of the new Mrs Alexander Gordon resembled, in some respects, those of Ethel Kelly. Although she originally became known in Sydney as a professional entertainer, she came from a lower middle-class Methodist family with a strong sense of Victorian respectability that led them to disapprove of professional acting as a suitable occupation for their daughter. Her actions, as well as journalistic reports of her views and previous experiences, implied modesty and personal and cultural refinement. This judgement found its vindication in her marriage to a barrister. In early

---

93 'A Chat with Miss Margaret Thomas', *The Theatre*, 1 March 1906, p.12; and untitled paragraph, no citation, loose cutting in Anne Lloyd papers, private collection, held at Axford, Wiltshire, England.
94 Untitled paragraph (2), no citation, loose cutting in AL Papers.
97 Lloyd, interview. See also Martha Rutledge, 'Gordon, Margaret Jane', *ADB*, vol.9, p.55.
twentieth century Sydney Society, with its freedom from an established aristocracy, members of the legal profession occupied a rank close to the top of the social ladder. It was unlikely that such a man would marry a woman who could not fit into the world of the Australian social elite. As with Kelly, therefore, Gordon’s example demonstrated that professional acting careers did not prevent women of the period from gaining social acceptance in Australia.

It is not surprising that like Ethel Kelly, Margaret Gordon put her musical skills to good use during the First World War, and graced the stage in numerous fund-raising matinees. A number of these featured a rendition of a poem by Henri Murger, *La Ballade du Desespere*, set to music by H. Bemberg, that brought Gordon as the singing voice and Kelly in the spoken role together in a popular and much-loved combination. Among the most notable of these wartime activities were a matinee entitled ‘A Concert of Brevity and Pith’, in aid of the Church of England Huts Fund, and the Lieutenant Godfrey Smith patriotic concert, held at the Conservatorium on 3 December 1918. However, due to the sudden and unfortunate onset of complete deafness, sometime before 1924, Margaret Gordon retired from even amateur stage appearances. She did not retire as an organiser, and subsequently undertook a hectic series of charitable, musical and theatrical activities. Her example as an accepted and much-loved member of Sydney Society who had managed to preserve a reputation as a respectable woman despite her stint as a professional actress, must surely have contributed, together with that of Ethel Kelly, to a

---


99 Lloyd, interview. Lloyd explained the hierarchy of careers and occupations that characterised the social ladder in Sydney. She also pointed to a trait in her mother frequently reported in the press - Lady Gordon’s ability to ‘charm’ people.

feeling that the theatre was no longer a forbidden platform on which young men and women could display their dramatic talents.

Such conviction did not spontaneously manifest itself in Sydney. Yet, during the war, amateur fund-raising theatricals proliferated and young women from key Society families, assisted and encouraged by Kelly and Gordon, set in motion an increasingly vigorous chain of theatrical activity. Helen Rutledge, a direct descendent of both the Chief Justice Sir Alfred Stephen and the founder of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company Sir Edward Knox, captured the highlights of Society life in her family history, *My Grandfather's House*. Recalling the popularity of ‘theatrical productions’ during the war, she also noted the example set by Nellie Melba, who earned her title of Dame of the British Empire in 1918, in recognition of the concert proceeds she gave away. The theatricals thus served two important purposes: they raised funds towards the war effort and they ‘gave people something to do and think about in a bad time’. Rutledge noted the crucial role that Kelly and Gordon played in the organisation of such productions. None expected the shows to compare to the professional theatre, so, in order to attract audiences, Kelly, Gordon and other organisers invited a large number of people ‘in a flattering way’ to participate.101

The most original of these ventures was the film production *Cupid Camouflaged*. Initiated by Barbara and Janet Knox, daughters of the sugar merchant Edward Knox, to raise funds for the Red Cross, and held in June 1918, it constituted the culmination of the wartime theatrical movement. Inevitably, Ethel Kelly starred in it, as the ‘scheming mother’ of the heroine, while T. H. Kelly dashed on and off the screen in various ‘extra’ roles, as did 160 other individuals. Featuring familiar Sydney scenes, including Bondi and Manly beaches, and various sprawling homes and gardens of the prestigious eastern
suburbs, it was inevitable that the premier of the film would attract a large audience, and ensure its success as a fund-raising venture. T.H. Kelly and his musical colleagues, and Ethel Kelly and Margaret Gordon in their popular rendition of the Ballade, contributed additional items to the opening night’s program.102

The preparation and presentation of Cupid Camouflaged mirrored philanthropic methods established in Britain the previous century. Negotiations with Australasian Films Ltd, Union Theatres Ltd, and J.C. Williamson Film Ltd, secured equipment, technical expertise and a venue, while the deliberate involvement of numerous Society members in non-essential roles ensured wide-spread interest.103 Yet the fund-raiser was innovative. In its use of the medium of film it represents a very early Australian product, and suggests a conditional receptivity to modern technology. The event also provided an opportunity for at least one young woman, Rosamunde Lumsdaine, who played the heroine, Rosita, to display her talents as an actress. Encouraged by the experience she soon became involved in other amateur theatrical productions, such as Quinney, arranged by Gregan McMahon for the Bush Book Club. In 1922, when Lumsdaine participated in a production by the McMahon-initiated semi-professional Sydney Repertory Theatre Society, her admirers anticipated a continuation of her theatrical career.104 Cupid Camouflaged, staged with the encouragement and direct involvement of Ethel Kelly and Margaret Gordon, thus provided a suitable context in which young women were enabled to explore their dramatic ability and to earn recognition of their skills. This may have helped to make professional acting more acceptable, and provided scope for the development of talents that previously would have remained undiscovered.

102 ibid., pp.187-190. Regrettably, Cupid Camouflaged deteriorated beyond repair before efforts were made to preserve it for posterity.
103 See Prochaska, Voluntary Impulse, pp.13-16.
In the wake of the war, the acting triumph of a member of Sydney’s vice-regal circles gave middle class women another laudable role model. As a daughter of the new State Governor, Lord Forster, and wife of a member of his staff, Captain Pitt Rivers, The Hon. Mrs Pitt Rivers was well received by the women of Sydney. As an actress in amateur theatricals, she also won the acclaim of theatre-lovers and Society-worshippers alike. From July 1922, she staged a series of matinees in the name of a variety of Sydney hospitals. With McMahon as director, and herself in the lead role, the successive productions of a pageant entitled, ‘In a Persian Garden’, The Pursuit of Pamela, and George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion proved extraordinarily successful as fund-raisers. They also confirmed for Ray Pitt Rivers a predilection for the theatre. Encouraged by her success, she embarked on a professional acting career in London, under the stage name of Mary Hinton. Reports reached Australia later that decade, and throughout the 1930s, of her appearances under that name, although it was also noted that she maintained an ‘attractive home in Chelsea’, and devoted much time to the care of her children.

Ethel Kelly, Margaret Gordon, Ray Pitt-Rivers and the amateurs involved in charitable matinees, together demonstrated that acting was a conditionally acceptable career choice. In fact Kelly and Gordon represented a long line of visiting women stars of the stage that remained in Australia thus providing further examples. Women could develop their acting talents, so long as they preserved that refinement of character outlined and convincingly demonstrated by Kelly in particular. Kelly combined a conservative cultural nationalism that drew on the old liberal ideals of social duty and imperial loyalty,

---

105 Society, vol.1, no.8, July 1922, p.18A; Society, vol.1, no.9, Aug. 1922, p.3; Stage and Society, vol.II, no.3, 27 July 1922, p.4; and Rutledge, Grandfather’s House, pp.180-81. The Pursuit of Pamela, which was repeated the following week, raised a total of £4000.
with progressive views on women's work. She did so, despite performing an enormous amount of charity and cultural work without pay. Nationalism and emancipationism affected Sydney women writers of the interwar period in other ways. As women dependent on professional acceptance for an income and confirmation of their role as cultural agents, they dealt with the respective issues of social acceptance, Victorian standards of womanliness, and national identity in a very different manner. It is to this constrasting example of cultural agency that we now turn.
Top left: 'Miss Ethel Knight Mollison, of the "Are You a Mason?" Co., The New Zealand Illustrated Magazine, July 1903, p.309.

Top right: Ethel Kelly in Australia after her presentation at the British Court, Society, Aug. 1922, p.4.

Bottom right: Lady Macbeth, Mrs T.H. Kelly; Attendant, Master Carleton Kelly, Society, Nov. 1922, p.11.
Mrs. Victor White, also a member of the energetic Committee.

The Hon. Mrs. Pitt Rivers is a daughter of His Excellency Lord Forster and Lady Forster; her husband, Captain Pitt Rivers, is attached to the Governor-General's staff. Both are exceedingly popular in Sydney.


Top right: Mrs Pitt Rivers, Society, Feb. 1922, p.19.

Bottom right: Rosamund Lumsdaine, Society, April 1922, front cover.