FANTASY ON AN INVENTOR: "DIGGERS' DARLING"

As the programme note by the artistic director of Theatre South says, they in the theatre are “ultimately concerned with legend and memory—not with history.” This is true enough, although a person such as Evelyn Owen, inventor of the Owen sub-machine gun, is surely allied to history and not legend. In any event, it is too late for such a disclaimer, for this appeared in the programme, which is read on the night of the performance. The trouble was that the very intensive build-up for the play’s production stressed the amount of research which had gone into its writing, thereby bringing expectations within the ambit of people concerned with historical fact. Nor does one wish to see a play either perpetuate any legend which may exist or, worse, serve to create one.

It is the more to be regretted that in places a play with such pretensions descends into crude farce. The underlying inexperience or carelessness of the playwright is such that he makes the letters A.I.F. stand for Australian Infantry Force, and makes an officer wearing the rank-badge of captain say that he (played by a woman) bears the rank of major. But that sort of travesty need not concern a note such as this, particularly when a long scene can be as silly as that in which two blimp-style officers with cherry-red noses make tea and behave like utter goats as if they were typical of all their kind. Similarly, a female foreman is shown as a sort of fiend. The playwright’s sense of reality does not apparently embrace the simple fact that officers and bosses are in general no worse and no better than any other cross-section of humanity. However, one should disregard such distortions, and concentrate on the play’s victims: Evelyn Owen, his family and the truth of the matter.

Let it be said bluntly at the outset, then, that the man and his family in the play bear little resemblance to reality. So far as alleged historical research is concerned, perhaps it is sufficient to say that the closest blood relation of Evelyn now living, the person most able to speak intimately of him, was not even interviewed. This person is his sister Eleanor who, hearing that she was to be portrayed in the play, demanded a sight of the script, and soon had a heavy blue pencil at work. For instance, at that stage a priest was in the play urging the Owen family to go to mass more regularly. They were in fact Anglicans. And some other scenes were diplomatically deleted as a result of her blue-pencilling and trenchant comments. So much for research. But somewhat belatedly, perhaps, the programme note thanks Eleanor (Mrs. O’Donnell) for gracious assistance.

So far as Evelyn himself is concerned, the play can be allowed to bear a very vague resemblance to a part of him. Yet it is far from even remotely representing either the whole man or the true nature of his achievement, nor—without belittling him in the least—does it give credit where it is due.

Maybe someone says: what do you know, anyhow? Therefore I must declare my credentials. We were of an age, he a little older than I, but we knocked around and went to school together. There were five Owen children, and five of us; and our parents had been
close friends for generations back. We saw much of each other, day in, week-end out.

The dissimilarities of the play begin with the parents. Ernest Owen inherited a law practice, but had not qualified. Nevertheless, he had a reputation as a very good conveyancer. He also had a reputation as a bon viveur and something of a lady-killer: not that any successes in this line came from good looks, because he was short, nuggetty and in no way handsome. The secret of any successes lay in a charm of manner and speech which all the Owens had in varying but still pronounced degrees. You could not help enjoying their company, even if disposed to try.

The other outstanding family characteristic was their sense of fun. This, again, they had in varying degrees. As an instance, Ernest had a sister, Julia, who married a Welshman of distinguished ancestry. He was Major Bodychan Sparrow. Mrs. Sparrow was a person I myself remember as a person of quite exquisite poise and natural gentility; but I doubt if her own sense of fun equalled that of her brothers when, having had a few to celebrate, they turned up at her wedding, as I have heard, lustily singing the old nursery rhyme: "Who killed Cock Robin? I said the sparrow...." I can't answer for the reactions of bride or, still less, the bridegroom, Major Sparrow. But I feel sure the mournfulness of the song was quickly dissipated by the conviviality of the singing brothers. Their sense of fun was irrepressible.

Well, that alone was enough of an interesting background for the young inventor-to-be. But no less interesting was his mother. She was a daughter of Sir William McMillan, who for his political services in N.S.W. and the Federal sphere, including the movement towards federation, was awarded the high honour of K.C.M.G. He had five children, three of whom I remember. There was Betha, principally because she was a successful journalist who married a famous airman, Dudley Davidson, whom we all revered. Then there was Bill, as we irreverently called him, the rather dissolute author of swags of unperformed plays (life was hard then). The third child of Sir William whom I remember was Constance, who married the earthy Ernest Owen. Educated in England, she had her own brand of charm, in a wafty, unworldly way. Perhaps the best word to describe her is fey. And she was memorably lovely.

Of this marriage there were five issue: David, Julian (called Paddy), Eleanor, Evelyn, and Peter. Paddy and Eleanor survive. They all lived in a charming old home, called Alma Cottage, opposite the court-house in Market Street, Wollongong, and there Mrs. Owen directed their early education, in the best English manner, before they underwent formal schooling, in a manner of speaking, because her tuition was rather a dubious quantity. She was no disciplinarian; and as to her concept of education, I have often heard her say that one's education was complete with French vocabulary and a knowledge of algebra.

With a parentage and background so interesting, Evelyn (or Evo, as he was always called) could not fail to be an unusual individual.
But my comments on the development of young Evo will have to await another instalment.

—Edgar Beale.

ARCHIVES OF ILLAWARRA

The May meeting of the Society’s Council received with intense interest a letter from the Environmental Heritage Committee of Wollongong-Shellharbour-Kiama seeking support for a Regional Archives for Illawarra. It is thought that all three Councils, with the Illawarra County Council, might combine to provide a qualified and experienced archivist with a secretary and assistant to conserve past and present records, and ensure continuity for the future. Moreover, it could encourage local organizations of the broadest description, industrial or commercial, to deposit with it records past and present, because what may be trite today may be history tomorrow. This sort of thing is always important, but it is so much the more important when it is realized that Illawarra is a uniquely self-contained region, both geographically and communally.

Through the foresight of the University of Wollongong, with Professor Jim Hagan at the head, the University has amassed a most impressive archival collection. The University is now an official repository for local archives under the blessing of the State Archives Authority. But economic considerations and rationalization have enforced a limitation, and for the present at least the University is restricted in what it may do.

This is all the more reason, then, for the local government authorities to combine in leadership in this important field, perhaps with the objective of ultimately integrating University and all other sources of history into a working tool for experts and amateurs alike. At the same time collections of historical material—pictures, photographs, documents—could be assembled, recorded, and made available on a more systematic basis than has been possible in the past. Without this, there is a very real danger of loss or gradual destruction.

The proposal has the enthusiastic support of the Society’s Council, and we look forward to Illawarra’s civic fathers realizing the immense service they may now render to history.

A LINK WITH THE FALKLANDS

Mrs. Hilde Shaw, who was the Society’s Secretary at the time, recalls that H.M.S. Plymouth, unfortunately damaged in the Falkland Islands fighting, visited Port Kembla in 1970 for Anzac Day and the Cook Bicentenary celebrations. The commanding officer was our guest for the afternoon of the unveiling of the plaque near the lighthouse, and Mrs. Shaw and our then President, Miss Phyllis de Jersey, were afterwards the guests of the officers on board.

She would of course, have a different captain and crew in 1982; but we wish them all good fortune and a safe return home.