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Abstract

Multi-media careers in the wider global entertainment market of the United States, Europe and Britain were commonly sustained by Australian-born performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such performers indicate something of the international reach of mobile actorly careers in the modern period (Kelly; Dixon & Kelly). Validation through overseas success is also a persistent model of the Australian performer. What then is an 'Australian' performer, in an enterprise in which ethnicities and regional identifications are mobile and frequently claimed for interested professional or social purposes? Opportunities and talent, birth, beauty, gender, regional or class identifications, whether assumed, avowed or disavowed – these are the categories which actors must manage as part of their careers and manipulate as elements of their stage personae.

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Caroline and Cyril Keightley: Australian Actors from Bushrangers to Broadway

Multi-media careers in the wider global entertainment market of the United States, Europe and Britain were commonly sustained by Australian-born performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such performers indicate something of the international reach of mobile actorly careers in the modern period (Kelly; Dixon & Kelly). Validation through overseas success is also a persistent model of the Australian performer. What then is an 'Australian' performer, in an enterprise in which ethnicities and regional identifications are mobile and frequently claimed for interested professional or social purposes? Opportunities and talent, birth, beauty, gender, regional or class identifications, whether assumed, avowed or disavowed — these are the categories which actors must manage as part of their careers and manipulate as elements of their stage personae.

In the year 1892 two interesting actors both made their show business debuts. The first was the daughter of the New South Wales rural squattocracy, an Australian-born beauty who in her youth became a national heroine. She is remembered now, if at all, as a minor character in a classic colonial novel. Late in her life, this woman performed her own early heroic deeds on the popular stage in a melodramatic play written especially for her, which played in second-rank companies in Australia. Despite this, she was in her own way an Australian international celebrity. She died in the Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney on 7th December 1898, aged 57, still 'a beautiful old lady, with fine white hair' (*Otago Witness*, 11 March 1897 39). The other actor is the tall and handsome younger son of New South Wales rural gentry, born in 1875 into a family of four boys. Although destined for the law, at the age of seventeen he instead joined a ramshackle touring theatre company in Victoria. After assiduous work in Australia and a steady rise in J.C. Williamson companies, he left Australia to make his West End debut in 1902, and within a few years he had convincingly 'made it' in London. After a considerable career as a Broadway leading man, he died in 1929 in the USA aged 54. These two actors who went from bushrangers to Broadway are Caroline Keightley, born Caroline Rotton, daughter of Henry Rotton, pastoralist and MLA for Bathurst, and her younger son Cyril Keightley.

Both mother and son were blessed with natural good looks which complemented their high social caste. At the time of the tall and fair Caroline Rotton's marriage to the equally tall and good-looking Henry McCrummin Keightley, a pastoralist and police magistrate, they were considered the handsomest couple in the country



Caroline Keightley (Perier Collection), Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW – ON5/155.

(*The Era*, 20 February 1899). They took up pastoral holdings at Dunn's Plains, where on Saturday 24th October 1863, the bushranger Ben Hall and his associates

Mickey Burke, John Vane, Johnny Gilbert and John O'Meally attacked their station. Keightley shot Burke in the stomach, and Burke then killed himself rather than be captured. But upon Caroline's appeal Hall, who though a professional bushranger was not essentially violent, prevented Vane from shooting Keightley in revenge. The ensuing events became entangled in later social histories by conflicting popular memories (for example, 'Mrs Keightley and the Hall Gang'), but the essential aspects are clear. Caroline persuaded the intruders that she was able to get cash at short notice. With her husband left as hostage she rode the fifty miles to Bathurst accompanied by her neighbour, Dr Pechey, ousting her father from bed early on the Sunday morning. The canny Henry Rotton marked the banknotes of the £500 ransom, Caroline returned with it to her homestead, and Hall and associates departed leaving the couple unharmed. Eighteen months later Ben Hall was himself gunned down, thus founding his own forms of mythic circulation, while Caroline's courage and riding ability would spread her fame (if not her name) world-wide via fiction, film and other forms of adaptive exchange. The Gulgong police magistrate, one Thomas Alexander Browne, fictionalised the deeds of 'Mrs Knightley' in *Robbery Under Arms*, his 1882 tale of bushranging and gold written under the pen-name Rolf Boldrewood (Lea-Scarlett, McPherson, Moore, Penzig). A decade after its first serialised appearance in the *Sydney Mail*, Caroline it seems decided to take charge of her own story, seeking to capitalise upon it in a dramatic version.

Reports suggest that in the early 1890s she commenced her theatrical training in Tasmania with the larger-than-life provincial melodramatist, Dan Barry (*Launceston Examiner*, 14 May, 1892 7). On the 10th February 1892 the play *Bail Up* by Lester Bellingham and Arthur Wrangham premiered at Bathurst's Victoria Theatre. Her co-stars for the two performances were experienced Australian actors, with George Ireland as Henry Keightley and Alfred Boothman as the Ben Hall character 'Captain Burke', a vengeful black-hearted scoundrel. Caroline herself, as performer, repeated onstage her epic horseback ride ('Bail Up'). This city may seem suitable for such a local and topical sensation, but rural memories are long. The Bathurst audience 'didn't quite like to see the lady making capital out of an event which cost one man his life and very nearly cost the late husband his' (*Otago Witness*, 10 March 1892 36). The operative word in this judgement is 'lady'; Caroline is positioned as a wayward daughter of the squattocracy rather than as a performer. The troupe then took their play to Albury where Browne himself, who had clearly benefited most from his own fictionalising of the Keightley story, was the town's Police Commissioner, but the play did little better.

By August of 1892 Caroline was in Brisbane performing *Bail Up* at the Gaiety with the Wilson Forbes Company. According to the *Brisbane Courier's* theatre advertisements (20 & 22 August 1892), she rode 'a thoroughbred lent by Mr Fenwick' to cheers from an audience packed to the doors, 'notwithstanding bad times and strong opposition'. The theatrical 'opposition' was in fact considerable:



Cyril Keightley as Young Marlow in *She Stoops to Conquer* (1904–1905). (Author's Collection.)

Robert Courtneidge and London's Gaiety Burlesque Company playing *Faust Up to Date* in the Opera House. The 'bad times' were the onset of the 1890s depression, and theatrical business was precarious everywhere. In August Keightley also took up the offensive against her own writers, Bellingham and Wrangham. These two were now in London giving out word of a proposed production of *Bail Up* to star Keightley herself in 'her' role. She posted correspondence dated from Sydney on 13th July in the London theatrical trade paper the *Era* (27 August 1892) declaring 'I am at present touring the colonies with this play' and anyone else claiming to be the real Caroline is 'a fraud', and would be sued by her London solicitor. The Forbes

company took their show to the Theatre Royal in Rockhampton commencing 13th September, and again it was Caroline herself rather than the production that was seen as the attraction (*Morning Bulletin*, 14 September 1892 6). Next month saw them in Charters Towers, and in mid-1893 she continued to perform her role, now with the J.S. Lyle company, in such centres as Bendigo, Horsham and Mt Gambier.

Why did the aristocratic Caroline take to the stage in the popular and unruly genre of bushranger drama? Her father Henry Rotton had died in 1881, followed in 1887 by her husband 'Harry' Keightley so it is possible that the widowed Caroline's finances did not remain healthy during the 1890s economic plunge. A further clue might lie in her writers' creation of a bad Ben Hall character: an example of a bushranger as villain in a populist genre that by then was equally apt to cast outlaw figures as chivalrous, or at most ambiguous, heroes. Yet even framed in production favouring a gentry perspective, in the writing of which she probably had a big say, Caroline was nonetheless exhibiting herself in a genre that her law-enforcing and property-owning caste despised and deplored. Such

unrespectable drama was at best deemed injurious to the maintenance of good order; at worst, it verged on the seditious.

The 'colonial heroine' whom most Australian audiences encountered is exemplified by Aileen Marston in the play *Robbery Under Arms*, which was dramatised by Alfred Dampier and Garnet Walch. It premiered in Melbourne in 1890 and enjoyed lengthy popularity on stage and film. But as Richard Fotheringham has shown in his edition of this play, this version was far more resonant of the recent exploits of the Kelly gang, and the horse-riding and warm-hearted Australian heroine was by then a stock character with few points of contact with the aristocratic colonial equestrian 'Kate' Keightley of three decades ago. This urban, democratic and Irish-inflected form of the bush melodrama constructed heroines who could be identified as proletarian. Given her social sympathies and traumatic experience, Caroline would be little likely to entertain R.B. Walker's assertion that 'to some extent bushranging was an act of protest against social wrongs and governmental oppression' (13). Yet, a strong-minded and unconventional woman of some spirit, Caroline Keightley took an atypical path for one of her background: she became an 'actress' who performed to raucous popular audiences. Through *Bail Up* Caroline both performed herself as colonial heroine, and sought to take ownership of her own legend.

Few such hindrances of gender expectations confined Cyril, her equally tall, handsome and fair son. His own rural barnstorming, possibly in the rambunctious Dan Barry companies, commenced in 1892, the same year that his mother played in *Bail Up* (*Otago Witness*, 22 July 1908 69). While Keightley himself claimed that his mother Caroline had herself played 'for some years' with George Rignold (*Evening Post*, 14 June 1913 12), this has not been confirmed, though it is possible that, mindful of family sentiment, Caroline used a stage name. By 1895 Cyril was himself in Rignold's company in Sydney playing in Drury Lane-type melodramas, where good looks and well-bred ease of person and manner were professional assets. With the Brough-Boucicault company's repertoire of modern society comedies, these actorly strengths were further developed. While he acted as support for distinguished visitors such as the 1896 tour of Kyrle Bellew and Cora Brown-Potter, and Reuben Fax and Edith Crane in *Trilby*, the logic of casting to physical type implies that an actor of Keightley's physique and natural talent was clearly suitable to play leading men. His work was praised and his acting responsibilities became more important. By 1897 he was touring Australia and New Zealand in support and character roles for the Julius Knight company, and it was during this tour that his mother Caroline died. But could he make the transition from good support to leading roles, and if so, would it be in Australia or elsewhere? A New Zealand comment on his work with Bellew-Brown pinpoints his industrial predicament: leading actors were made abroad. 'It seems somewhat strange that so capable a young actor as Mr Cyril Keightley is kept so much in the background... Perhaps, Mr Bellew has a shrewd notion that his own glory might

be eclipsed if Mr Keightley were pushed a little more prominently to the front' (*Observer* [Wellington], 23 January 1897 9).

In 1901 Keightley and his wife the South Australian actor Ethel Dane¹ left Australia and toured South Africa in the company of the American star, Nance O'Neil. This imposing tragedienne, Australia's first Hedda Gabler, was strikingly tall, so she probably looked out for even taller men to be her co-stars — the logic of casting to gendered type again. O'Neil's next date after Egypt was the ultimate goal of England, where Cyril made his West End premiere supporting her in Sudermann's *Magda*. The Keightleys then put their class contacts to work, staying in wealthy rural Surrey with his uncle, the Reverend George Keightley, and chatting up such leading managers as Charles Wyndham and Henry Irving (*Otago Witness*, 10 September 1892 56; 1 October 1902 56). By 1903 the 'tall, broad-shouldered handsome young Australian' had joined Frank Benson's touring

Shakespeare company, thus getting the kind of experience in major classic roles which came too seldom in Australia. He made an immediate sensation as the lead in the touring Benson version of Stephen Phillips' poetic drama *Paolo and Francesca*, and in April 1903 Benson showcased his star in London (*Star* [Canterbury], 9 February 1903 1; *Evening Post* [Wellington], 21 March 1903 11; *Otago Witness*, 15 April 1903 56). Keightley then tried provincial management for himself and Ethel, performing Shakespeare and period comedy such as *She Stoops to Conquer*, yet he turned down an offer from H.B. Irving (the son of the late Sir Henry) to tour America as a replacement for the



SARTORIS: "I'm not a saint—but every hour with you makes a man better. Is it quite impossible?"

Cyril Keightley and Jessie Bateman in *The Whip*. (*The Play Pictorial*, Vol 14, No. 87, p. 282.)

murdered matinee idol William Terriss (*Evening Post*, 11 November 1905 13; 13 October 1906 13). Keightley was not about to go backwards now. When he finally arrived in America, it would be as a West End star.

An imperial Briton by caste and family heritage, Keightley exhibited little sentiment for regional partisanship. In 1906 he declared in a London interview:

Australia is all very well in its way, but is not to be compared with the old world in light, learning, and culture. In fact, he admits, that he is himself an incomparably better actor than he was when he left his native land, owing to the superior training of the higher standard in London.

This contrasts with the comments in the same article of his fellow Australian-born actor Arthur Greenaway, then also working in Britain:

The diversity of performances, the frequent changes of plays, and the exacting nature of Australian audiences ... gives the actor experience he has no opportunity of gaining in bigger centres; while, as for walks of life outside acting, the Australian more than holds his own everywhere. 'The Australian is the world's handy man,' concludes Mr. Greenaway; 'wherever you go, in any part of the earth, you will find some Australian or other occupying a big position, and directing some great enterprise.'

(*Evening Post*, 1 December 1906 11)

In 1908 Keightley was at last ready for a significant American season. He was selected by the major impresario Charles Frohman to co-star on Broadway with Billie Burke, the celebrated and fascinating Edwardian musical comedy star. Their vehicle was a French comedy called *Love Watches*. Burke recalls sighting Keightley during this run standing in his dressing room in his underpants, with a top hat crammed over his head in order to straighten his curling hair: 'all actors are a little mad', is her conclusion (74–75). Many Australians were doing well in America at the time in theatre and cinema, and by now Keightley was dividing his time between the West End and Broadway. He performed major roles in Benson's Shakespeare prominent season at His Majesty's in 1910, and at Drury Lane in 1909 and 1910 he played the sexy villain Sartorys in the autumn melodrama, *The Whip*, set in the world of high society and horses. This kind of work flags an actor's arrival.

Until 1915 he crossed the Atlantic patrolled by U-boats to appear in both theatrical centres, but after 1917 his main work was on Broadway in modern comedies and drama. Though Broadway hosted a large expatriate British acting colony, New York does seem a strange wartime location for a patriotic son of Empire. Despite his extensive work with Benson, he performed in Shakespeare only once in the USA, playing Cassius to the Brutus of Tyrone Power in a 1918 *Julius Caesar*. The gravel-voiced South Australian, O.P. Heggie, later prominent in cinema character roles, was his occasional colleague, (for example, in *The New Sin* at Wallack's Theatre in 1912.) Always known publicly as an Australian actor, Keightley once actually performed an Australian character. *Just Beyond*, Reginald Goode's 'drama of the Australian bush' played in New York in December 1925

(*New York Times*, 1 December 1925 23). Keightley died on 14th August 1929 after an operation for stomach cancer. He was cremated, leaving Isobel Wright, his wife of a few months' standing, and a reputed estate of only £350 (*New York Times*, 30 August 1929 13). The headline of the *New York Times* report of his death (15 August 1929 18) calls him an 'Australian Actor, Long Prominent on [the] New York Stage'.

Unlike his colleagues O.P. Heggie or the comedienne Bille Burke (later Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*), Keightley did not live into the era of sound films. He made only one movie in Manhattan in 1915. *The Spendthrift* was set in the worlds of high society and fashion models, but has not survived. Hollywood was located across a continent, and Keightley was now pre-eminently a denizen of the east coast theatrical hub. Although his early training in tough Australian touring conditions laid the foundation of his career (as Arthur Greenaway correctly asserts), Keightley's physique, fine appearance and his social capital both enabled and shaped his professional life. Cyril Keightley was a distinguished upper-middle class gentleman and an upper middle-rank player. In America however he graduated from sensational society melodrama to sustained work in the mostly realist modern repertoire: the upmarket popular fare catered for today in quality film and television drama. This makes an interesting contrast to Caroline's brief career in provincial shoot'em-up bushranger melodrama.

It is clear that Australian actors have always been mobile, versatile, and prepared to follow the work in any region, country or genre. The class and gendered aspect of public careers is evident in the contrasted theatrical opportunities of the Keightleys, mother and son, who both in their differing modes became identified or re-constructed as mythic types of 'Australian' figures within the international systems of cultural and symbolic exchange.

NOTES

- ¹ Ethel Dane came from Adelaide and was reportedly Ethel Spiller. Her great London hit was *The Glad Eye* which ran in London for two years and which she played in Australia 1914–15. In 1925 they were divorced. He married actress Isabel Wright in January of the year of his death; Ethel married American film actor Louis Wolheim in New York in, reportedly, 1923 (*Milestones* online).

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