

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE TASMANIAN HISTORICAL RESEARCH  
ASSOCIATION HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY ROOM, TASMANIAN MUSEUM  
AND ART GALLERY, ON TUESDAY 9 JULY 2013 AT 8 PM.**

Present: The Vice-President, Ian Terry, in the chair and about 30 members and guests.

Minutes: The minutes of the previous meeting were read, and approved as a true record.

Business: The Vice-President referred to a forthcoming book by Simon Cubit about high-country huts. Alison Alexander sought photographs that might have been taken on the recent Oatlands excursion.

Speaker: In introducing Betty Pilgrim Mr Terry spoke of her very wide experience, especially in the Commonwealth public service. She had also engaged in education, including that of indigenous people, and her several degrees including one in post-graduate history at the University of Tasmania. Her topic tonight was 'Tasmanian Talent to the Fore—The Legendary Pollard Opera Company'.

Ms Pilgrim began by remarking that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries professional children's theatre was an established part of public entertainment, some troupes enjoying enormous success. One such, Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company' was formed in Launceston in May 1880, its history to extend over the next thirty years. It travelled many times throughout Australia and New Zealand, made nine trips to the Orient and others to North America and South Africa. Its members contributed to Australian cultural developments.

Father of the company was James Joseph Pollard, who as a pianoforte maker migrated to Tasmania in 1854, moving to Launceston in '59. He became the parent of fifteen children by his first wife, a further three by his second. These children underwent rigorous musical training, vocal and instrumental. James established first an orchestra, and then followed the model of a successful juvenile presentation of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pinafore* in London. Pollard's company largely comprised his own children, but came to include others of talent. Audiences were captivated, and advertisements proclaimed 'Advance Tasmania' and 'Tasmanian Talent to the Fore'. Often scarcely literate, the children memorised whole operas—words, music, gestures dialogue. On tour, the company often would give a different programme every night of the week, with additional matinees.

From time to time, and increasingly, various difficulties and incidents came to provoke concern at Pollards' management. In 1884 legal action alleged that children had been taken outside Australia without parental consent. In South Africa in 1899-1900 the company narrowly missed disaster on account of the Boer War. Back there in 1903, a fire at Durban caused massive destruction of costumes and scenery. In 1906 the company suffered further massive loss in consequence of the San Francisco earthquake. All the while illness and injury, even death, prevailed to substantial degree. The succession to management by one of JJ Pollard's sons worsened matters.

These troubles culminated in 1910 in India, charges spreading of gross cruelty and sexual exploitation. Such allegations were proved in Madras court proceedings. Newspapers made much of the issue. Repercussions in Australia led to remarkably swift passage of federal legislation, imposing strict conditions on the employment of children beyond Australia. This move had its place in the long history of concern in the treatment of children. Despite this unhappy scenario, it must be remembered that many parents saw the Company as offering their children otherwise impossible opportunities for travel and development of valuable skills. Strengthening that point, Ms Pilgrim concluded by outlining the later careers of Company members, who through generations ahead contributed much to theatrical and musical life in Australia and beyond.

The chairman thanked the speaker for her impressive paper, and the meeting closed at 9:15pm.

Michael Roe for Secretary

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