HELEN PORTER MITCHELL

Helen Porter Mitchell was born at Doonside, Richmond, a suburb of Melbourne, on 19 May 1861, the third of Isabella and David Mitchell's ten children and the first to survive infancy. On 25 March William Saurin Lyster, the wild Irish opera entrepreneur, launched his company's first Australian season with *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the opera in which Melba made her Covent Garden début twenty-seven years later. Two of the most important figures in the history of Australian opera had arrived together.

David Mitchell was a shareholder in Lyster's Prince of Wales Opera House, an investment which was probably prompted more from an interest in the profitability of bricks and mortar than the vagaries of operatic life, since Mitchell was a builder. In middle age Melba conceded: 'Throughout my life there has been one man who meant more than all others, one man for whose praise I thirsted, whose character I have tried to copy - my father'.

Mitchell was a Scot, born in Forfarshire on 16 February 1829, the son of a tenant farmer, William Mitchell, and his wife Anne. At seventeen he was apprenticed to a master mason at Kirriemuir. His indenture completed, he rejected the narrow future ahead of him at home and shipped out of Liverpool on 6 April 1852 in the three-masted sailing ship *Anna* with seventy-two other steerage passengers all headed for Australia.

He left Scotland with a purse containing 200 sovereigns, the gift of his widowed mother. By day he carried it with him. At night he slept on it. A dawn mutiny led by the crew forced a fight with Mitchell and other passengers that went on for some hours; at the end of it the purse was missing. David Mitchell stepped ashore at Melbourne on 24 July at the height of the gold-rush with a single gold piece in his pocket. When he died at eighty-seven he left nearly half a million pounds. As his daughter put it, 'the history of his endeavour is a romance before which I feel that my own history is commonplace'. An exaggeration if ever there was one.

Mitchell was simply a taciturn Scot with a nose for business and the skills a newly rich society needed. For a while he worked as a stonemason in Melbourne, saving enough to set up a shanty on the site in Richmond where he was to spend most of his life. In 1853 he
MELBOURNE'S OPERA BEFORE MELBA

Fully-fledged opera performances came to Melbourne only in 1853. The first was the opera that seems to haunt the Melba story, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, with Madame Marie Carandini as Lucia. Carandini (1826-94) was the English-born daughter of a coachman but came to Australia at the age of seven. She married a travelling musician, the counter-tenor Jerome, tenth Marquis di Carandini of Sanzano, who was exiled from Italy in 1835 for revolutionary activities. In Sydney Marie studied with the *émigré* Jewish composer Isaac Nathan and with Madame Wallace Bushelle, sister of the English composer, Vincent Wallace. She became the country's leading soprano, forming her own travelling opera company which toured Australia, India, America and New Zealand. All five of her daughters became singers who worked intermittently with the Carandini company. Since Marie's farewell was given in the Melbourne Town Hall on 3 February 1892, and her best-known daughter, Rosina Palmer, was the mainstay of the Melbourne Philharmonic Society oratorio performances after her marriage in 1860 and the soprano soloist of Scots Church after 1880, there can be little doubt that the family was known to Melba at least by reputation. The Carandini enterprise and the female independence it fostered, stemming as it did from financial necessity, could not have been lost on the equally resolute and independent Mitchell girl.

The *Lucia* of 1853 was a was contracted to put up a building in Bendigo, but the contractor went bankrupt just before the work was completed and Mitchell was forced to try his luck on the Castlemaine gold-fields. He panned with some success, but when his health began to fail he returned to Melbourne to set up as a building contractor, using the Burnley Street site in industrial, river-side Richmond as the centre of his business operations.

In 1857 he married Isabella Ann Dow, a girl four years his junior, one of the four daughters of James Dow, an engineer at Langlands Iron Foundry. (Dow emigrated from Forfarshire in 1842 and Mitchell met the family soon after he landed from the *Anna*.) That year a large brick and stucco house, Doonside, began to rise in place of the shanty; Mitchell built Menzies' Hotel in William Street; and he won the tender for the masonry work to repair St Patrick's Cathedral. Two years later it was decided to demolish the old cathedral, just as Mitchell was completing the first stage of his work. Not daunted, he set up a factory for steam-made and pressed bricks on the land next to Doonside.

By the time Nellie, his eldest daughter, was 13 he held shares in the Melbourne Builders' Lime and Cement Company, formed to break the monopoly of the Geelong limeburners. When she was 17 he bought Cave Hill Farm at Lilydale, where he worked the limestone and handled its distribution. His operations scarred the hills and stained the sky over a superb landscape. Melba described it as 'Mess, muck and money'.

In 1871 Mitchell built the huge warehouse of Paterson, Laing and Bruce in Flinders Lane. A year later he began work on Scots Church in Collins Street. He attended services there and sang in its choir for years. In death Melba lay there in state. In 1874 he built the Presbyterian Ladies College where his daughter became one of the first pupils. He was later to build the Prell's Building (1887), the Masonic Hall in Collins Street (1888), the Equitable Insurance Building (1893), the National Bank, and the New Zealand Loan Company's wool and grain warehouses at Kensington. In 1880 he employed 400 men for his biggest venture, the Royal Exhibition Buildings. The Melbourne International Exhibition opened there on 1 October with an 800-voice choir singing Leon Caron's cantata, 'Victoria'. The orchestra of 100 was drawn from the resources of the local Philharmonic societies and the Liedertafels, whose numbers included many ex-members of the leading English choral bodies. Possibly the 19-year-old Melba attended with her father, but probably not with her mother, who was by then fatally ill.

Caron's cantata ends:

O Thou whose arm hath for our fathers fought
Whose guiding hand their sons hath hither brought