

Balwyn History News July 20, 2020

Greetings to members and friends,

Well there is some good news and not so good news.

The good news for you all is that the BHS committee has decided that as we have held no face-to-face meetings since we last met in March,2020 we are not asking you to renew your subscriptions at the moment. We will resume our annual subscriptions in February 2021.

NO SUBSCRIPTIONS DUE THIS YEAR!

The not so good news is that we are yet again at level 3 restrictions in Greater Melbourne due to the increase in COVID19 cases and these restrictions will continue for a few more weeks. We have no idea when we will be able to resume our normal meetings.

For those of you who have email we have continued to send you items to amuse/interest you on an irregular basis and also send out an abbreviated newsletter. For those members who do not have email access (and there are still a few) we have mailed out a printed version of the informal newsletter at intervals.

Please continue to keep in touch with us. It is important not to feel isolated. It is also very nice to read the various items sent in by our members.

Stay safe, stay well and please stay warm!

Your BHS Committee (Marilyn, Matthew, Pat, Barbara and Heather)

PS Enjoy the music at the end of the article on Dame Nellie Melba.

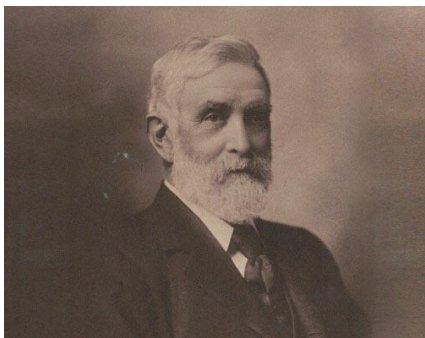
Dame Nellie Melba and her father David Mitchell

by

Matthew ETTY-LEAL

Dame Nellie Melba [GBE](#) (19 May 1861 – 23 February 1931), born **Helen Porter Mitchell**, was an Australian operatic soprano. She became one of the most famous singers of the late Victorian era and the early 20th century. She took the pseudonym "**Melba**" from Melbourne. Many years later in 1952, June Gough started using the stage name of Bronhill, an abbreviation of Broken Hill, which was her way of thanking her home town for its support in raising money to send her overseas for professional training as a singer.

Nellie's father **David Mitchell** (1829-1916) builder, contractor, and businessman, born in Forfarshire, Scotland, was apprenticed to a master mason. On completing his indenture, he sailed from Liverpool in 1852, arriving at Melbourne on the 24 of July.



David Mitchell

In 1856 he married Isabella. As a building contractor at his Richmond site, his grandest venture was the Exhibition Building, which employed 400 men and was opened in 1880, later to become Australia's first building to be awarded UNESCO World Heritage status. He also built Scots Church in Collins St, the Presbyterian Ladies' College, East Melbourne, (knocked down becoming the Masonic Centre) and the Menzies Hotel in William Street.

In 1874 he became a shareholder in the Melbourne Builders' Lime and Cement Co. By 1878 he had bought Cave Hill farm at Lilydale and began working its limestone deposits.

In 1890 Mitchell formed a company to mine a channel and tunnel on the Yarra River at Pound Bend, Warrandyte, and employed gangs of Chinese to work three miles (4.8 km) of riverbed for gold. By 1894 he had cheese, butter, bacon, ham and soap factories at Cave Hill, housing them in a complex of well-designed brick buildings. In 1888 his dairy had operated the colony's first mechanical milking device. By 1900 he owned vineyards and wineries at Yeringberg, Coldstream and St Hubert's.



Nellie and her father at Coldstream

David Mitchell's musical interests included, as a Presbyterian, being a long-time member of Scots Church choir, playing the violin at home, and encouraging talents of his daughter Helen (Nellie). Even when she became world famous, his natural reticence prevented him from openly praising her singing.

Melba's singing

Melba, after attending PLC, studied singing in Melbourne. David Mitchell moved the family to Mackay, Queensland, where he built a new sugar mill. Melba soon became popular in Mackay society for her singing and piano-playing. On 22 December 1882 in Brisbane, she married **Charles Nesbitt Frederick Armstrong** (1858–1948), the youngest son of Sir Andrew Armstrong. They had one child, a son, **George**, born on 16 Oct 1883. The marriage was not a success; the couple separated after a year, finally divorcing in 1900.



Nellie and her son George

She moved to Europe in search of a singing career. Nellie studied in Paris and soon made a great success there. Returning to London she quickly established herself as the leading lyric soprano at Covent Garden from 1888, achieving further success in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, and later at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, debuting there in 1893.



Nellie performing and standing outside her home, Coombe Cottage

Her repertoire was small; in her whole career she sang no more than 25 roles, being closely identified with 10 roles. She was known for her performances in French and Italian opera but sang little German opera.

Nellie also set up a music school in Richmond, which she later merged into the Melbourne Conservatorium. She was in Australia when the First World War broke out, and she threw herself into fund-raising for war charities, especially Red Cross, raising **£100,000**. In recognition of this, she was created a **Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire** (DBE) in March 1918, "**for services in organising patriotic work**".

Melba helped the careers of younger singers. She taught for many years at the Conservatorium in Melbourne and looked for a "**new Melba**". She published a book about her methods, which were based on those of Marchesi. The book opens:

"It is easy to sing well, and very difficult to sing badly! How many students are really prepared to accept that statement? Few, if any". They smile and say: "It may be easy for you, but not for me." Let me say in order to sing well, it is necessary to sing easily".

Nature lovers tried to persuade Nellie to curb her appetite for feathered hats. Though she refused, she explained that she loved native birds and on **Bird Day in 1911** exclaimed to the children of Australia her delight in '*the chatter and song of birds*'. The feathers in her hat were seen to nod gravely as she spoke.

In 1922 Melba returned to Australia, where she sang at the phenomenally successful "*Concerts for the People*" in Melbourne and Sydney, with low ticket prices, attracting 70,000 people. In 1924 for another Williamson opera season, she caused resentment among local

singers by importing an entire chorus from Naples. In 1926 she made her farewell appearance at Covent Garden, singing in scenes from *Roméo et Juliette*, *Otello*, and *La Bohème*.

She is well remembered in Australia for her seemingly endless series of "farewell" appearances, including performances in the mid-1920s and concerts in Sydney on 7 August 1928, Melbourne on 27 September 1928, and Geelong in November 1928. She also sang in Bendigo staying in the Shamrock Hotel opposite the Town Hall. She is renowned at being the only person who had the Town Hall clock turned off the night before she performed, wanting to ensure she had a good night's sleep! From this tour, she is remembered in the vernacular Australian expression "**more farewells than Dame Nellie Melba**".



Dame Nellie Melba made her final farewell of all in St Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst Coombe Cottage Coldstream

In 1909, Melba bought a 60 acre dairy farm at Coldstream, and in 1912 she had a home built there (extending an existing cottage). She named Coombe Cottage after a house she rented near London. The hedge is trimmed yearly at a cost of over **\$50,000!** The property included a pool where she entertained, amongst others, **Gloria Swanson, and Charlie Chaplin.**



Coombe Cottage gardens

Her stables – now houses an art gallery, toilets (where you hear Nellie singing) and photos of her at the horse races. Dame Nellie owned various racehorses, and her racing colours were **purple, green, and white** which were the colours of the suffragettes who fought for the female vote.

Food items: The celebrated French chef Auguste Escoffier, a good friend, created famous dessert [Peach Melba](#), combining peaches, raspberry sauce & ice cream at the Savoy Hotel London in her honour. He also created [Melba toast](#) – very dry, crisp, thinly sliced toast often served with soups or topped with melted cheese and pate, which became part of Dame Nellie's diet.

Her cars: a Russell, Pierce-Arrow, Renault, Fiat, and a Rolls Royce. She also owned a Cadillac and possibly a second Pierce Arrow. In 1912 Dame Nellie purchased a **1911 Pierce-Arrow**, the equivalent of a Rolls Royce, on a tour in the US. While she was on tour in 1913, Melba's chauffeur drove her in the Pierce Arrow around the country. When she returned to UK & Europe, the car went with her.

Her car was confiscated by French just before World War 1 and in 1918 our Fire Brigade purchased it, transporting the Pierce Arrow to Melbourne. It was in such poor condition that Nellie gave the car to the fire brigade in 1919. The back was cut down with hoses and machinery installed, converting the vehicle into "**Melba's Pump**".



Nellie's 1911 Pierce Arrow in the Fire Services Museum, East Melbourne

In 1933 the brigade auctioned off the vehicle. In 1978 the Lakes Entrance car museum put it up for sale and the Melbourne Fire Brigade Historical Society purchased it. This vehicle is now in the Fire Services Museum, a photo of Dame Nellie driving the car, accompanied by her father. In England she travelled in her own private train carriage.

Farewell In 1929 she visited Egypt, where she contracted a fever that she never entirely shook off. Her last performance was in London on 10 June 1930.

She returned to Australia but died in St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, in 1931, aged 69, of septicaemia, caused by face lift surgery. She was given an elaborate funeral from Scots' Church, Melbourne, where as a teenager she sang in the choir.

The funeral motorcade was over a kilometre long. Billboards in many countries said simply "*Melba is dead*". Part of the event filmed for posterity. Melba was buried in the cemetery at Lilydale, near Coldstream. Her headstone bears Mimi's farewell words: "**Addio, senza rancor**" (Farewell, without bitterness).



Lady Vestey

The major conversion wish of her grand-daughter, **Lady Pamela Helen Vestey**, (1916 – 2011) was to open Coombe Cottage to the public. This wish has been continued by her 2 sons, Lord Sam and Mark, who live in UK, initially going to school at Lilydale Primary before Eton. Since 2011 thousands of people, including me and my family, have enjoyed:

- a) morning or afternoon tea with scones, jam, and cream, with particularly good coffee and tea
- b) lunches or dinners with (a special) Peach Melba and local produce including particularly good Coombe Estate wines
- c) tours of the gardens, and even
- d) on special occasions, tours of her home.

Melba's Music and Costumes

Melba You Tube documentary 4.45 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or61-tnTD7c>

The Melba collection – Art Centre costumes 8:35 minutes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGzUaQ9_YNc

Puccini: La Boheme- O souave fanciulla. Caruso & Melba (1907) 3:21 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEdMgSRqwhq>

Nellie Melba 1904 Verdi La Traviata "Sempre libera" 2 minutes

<https://www.youtubbe.com/wtch?v=NVmoOOTJVcO>

Nellie Melba sings Tosti's "Mattinata." 1904

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xrzLd1T52Y>