

**Tracing my favourite ancestor in Australia**  
**Harry LESTON: a man of many parts**  
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Perhaps I didn't hear her correctly but I recalled my mother saying her great uncles, brothers of her paternal grandmother Mary Jane DALY, were amateur actors and vaudeville performers called Fred and Lester DALY. As I'd been involved with amateur theatre myself, this intrigued me. For some time I filed the information in my head along with stories about other ancestors.

Gradually I unravelled some of the DALY family's history by purchasing death and marriage certificates and consulting army records relating to Mary Jane's father. I discovered John DALY had joined the 65th regiment of the British army in County Clare in Ireland in 1839.<sup>1</sup> By September 1845, when he married Mary McDONALD, he was stationed at the Sheerness garrison in Kent. Nine months later his regiment embarked on the convict transport ship *John Calvin* for Tasmania, via Norfolk Island. In Hobart they transferred to the *Java* which took them to Sydney and, finally, to the Bay of Islands in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

Two daughters, Mary Jane and Catherine, were born around 1848 and 1849. In December 1849 John paid £4 for his release from the army.<sup>3</sup> John junior was born on 17 January 1851 in Wellington and Robert just over a year later, in Wanganui.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards the family sailed on the schooner *William*, arriving in Sydney on 11 August 1852.<sup>5</sup> They settled in Surry Hills where two more sons, Charles and Austin, and two daughters, Theresa and Frances, were born. John senior, who worked as a labourer, messenger, bank clerk and storeman, amassed enough money to purchase two properties in Lower Campbell Street. The children were well-educated; John junior attending Fort Street Model School, a select school founded in 1849 which only accepted academically gifted students. Unfortunately, records of early pupils are not available so it's not possible to know when John was there.<sup>6</sup>

I'm not sure when or how I first discovered that John used the name Harry LESTON during his professional career and his brother Robert, a printer by trade, participated in amateur concerts and entertainments as Fred LESTON. These were obviously the brothers Fred and Lester DALY mentioned by my mother.

About twenty years ago I began searching mining newspapers on microfilm in the State Library of Western Australia to see what I could discover about Harry's career. I started with the *Bulletin*, which had an excellent theatre column and informative reviews. When I found a reference to Harry I would see what else I could find in the *Age*, the *Argus* or *The Sydney Morning Herald*. This enabled me to compile quite an extensive dossier on Harry. In recent years, with the availability of indexed newspapers for all states through the National Library's website, I've been able to fill in many gaps.

Harry began his stage career as a mesmerist in Melbourne around 1867–68 while he was still a teenager. An advertisement in September 1869 indicated 'Mr. Leston will appear in a Physiological Phreno-Mesmeric Séance' at the Prahran Town Hall.<sup>7</sup>

An article in the *Bulletin* in 1901 suggests he joined Martinetti's French Pantomime Company after his first public appearance as a mesmerist.<sup>8</sup> The writer notes he subsequently 'drifted through various stages of show

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<sup>1</sup> Great Britain, War Office, 65th Regiment Foot Musters WO12/7409 and WO12/7419.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Stewart, *The 'Royal Tigers' in New Zealand*, in *New Zealand Genealogist*, 16, 159 (October 1985), p229 & Richard Cannon, *Historical records of the British army comprising the history of every regiment in His Majesty's service* (65th Regiment), pp93-94.

<sup>3</sup> Great Britain, War Office, 65th Regiment Foot Musters WO12/7415–7419.

<sup>4</sup> New Zealand Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages: birth certificates 1851/223 and 1852/252.

<sup>5</sup> SRNSW Reel 1279 Colonial Secretary, Records of vessels arrived 4/5252 July–September 1852.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that John (Harry Leston) was an 'old boy' of the school is noted in 'Jubilee of Fort-street School' in *Australian Town and Country Journal* 9 September 1899, p22 and 'Our Public Schools. Fort-Street Model School. Historical Sketch' in *Australian Town and Country Journal* 27 May 1903, pp30-33. Information about records of the school from Christine Egan, archivist, 7 November 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Argus* 14 September 1869, p8.

<sup>8</sup> The Martinetti-Ravel Troupe first appeared in Melbourne in October and November 1867.

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business, including circus-clowning, conjuring, ventriloquism, nigger minstrelsy, song and dance, and comic opera, until he finally settled down to the “legitimate”.<sup>9</sup>

Richard STEWART, John HENNINGS and George COPPIN opened the new Haymarket, later Duke of Edinburgh, Theatre in 1869. It seems likely that Harry began his acting career there under J R GREVILLE. His big break came when he was called on at short notice to take over Maggie CHESTER’s role of Blueskin in the pantomime *Harlequin Jack Sheppard* when she became ill.<sup>10</sup>

Actors in the nineteenth century stock companies tended to be type-cast in specialist roles according to their physical attributes and stage mannerisms, and became identified with these roles in much the same way as today’s soap opera actors become identified with their parts. Harry’s Irish policeman was his trademark as George COPPIN’s Billy Barlow was his. No doubt COPPIN, ‘the father of Australian theatre’, provided a role-model for Harry.

Over the next forty years Harry appeared in a multitude of parts with major companies such as those of Alfred DAMPIER, Louise POMEROY, Mrs Scott SIDDONS and ‘the triumvirate’ of J C WILLIAMSON, Arthur GARNER and George MUSGROVE. Nineteenth century actors were versatile, performing farce one night, melodrama the next and Shakespeare the next, with comic recitations at concerts on Sundays; they soon became familiar with all aspects of theatre. Harry was dubbed ‘the people’s favourite’ for his portrayal of low comedy parts, pantomime dames and humorous roles in Shakespearean plays. He was skilled at imitating various dialects and accents including aboriginal, American, Chinese, Scottish, Irish and German.

His portrayal of an aboriginal in *Never Too Late to Mend* at the Queen’s Theatre in Sydney in 1880 was lauded by the *Bulletin*’s theatrical reviewer:

We have seldom seen a better imitation of the Australian aboriginal than that given by Mr Harry Leston, and but very slightly overdrawn in point of conversation: the peculiar gait, erect, though unmilitary, position, the gestures and expressions are all the result of study: and Mr Leston keeps the fun of the piece to the end.<sup>11</sup>

Harry married Florence ROUSE in 1886, the marriage ending in divorce in 1901. Despite allegations of Harry’s desertion (by Florence) and Florence’s adultery (by Harry) Harry’s continual working and touring was probably a major cause of the marriage’s failure. As well as stage performances he participated in benefit and charity concerts, at which he gave recitations and sang humorous songs; he was often working seven nights a week and Saturday and Sunday afternoons. There were no children of the union.

At Sydney’s Gaiety Theatre in 1886 Harry’s performance as the Irishman Patruccio Gormani in *The Great Pink Pearl*, which the *Bulletin*’s reviewer considered had ‘as many plots as an Orange lodge’, received some praise:<sup>12</sup>

The latter character in the hands of Mr. Leston is the most interesting in the play, and it is a very passable representation of the too-often-murdered stage Irishman. He is letter-perfect in his part, has a quick, genial flow of lively language, and makes the character bright, amusing, and attractive throughout.<sup>13</sup>

Theatre thrived during the eighties; by 1887 Sydney had six theatres in regular production. By the end of the decade, however, variety performances, comprising circus-style acts and sketches, vaudeville and ‘entertainments’ had overtaken legitimate theatre in popularity.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘At Poverty Point’ in *Bulletin* 26 January 1901, p28a.

<sup>10</sup> *Town and Country Journal* 13 July 1889, p33.

<sup>11</sup> *Bulletin* 1 May 1880, p2.

<sup>12</sup> *Bulletin* 10 April 1886, p9.

<sup>13</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 5 April 1886, p7.

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With professional theatre work scarce Harry continued giving recitations and performing at benefits. It was not surprising that he began teaching dramatic art, deportment, elocution and voice building by 'splendid method', in order to provide himself with a regular income.<sup>14</sup> From May 1890 he offered lessons at pupils' own residences or at Mascotte, 48 Surry Street, Darlinghurst.<sup>15</sup> He taught for many years at Peel's Chambers at 5 Hunter Street, initially in partnership with Walter HOWE and, after 1894 when HOWE left Australia, on his own. He also instructed night classes in elocution at the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts and collaborated with others such as dancing teacher Madame DUVALLI, singing tutor Frank ADAMS and fellow elocutionist Frank DOWN. By 1906 music teacher Francis Robert PEEL and singing instructor S C JEFFCOTT had joined him to form the Sydney Orchestral College.<sup>16</sup>

Harry and Walter HOWE organised an amateur dramatic group to showcase and give experience to their pupils. Later, Harry joined George BULLER to launch a company of twelve 'ladies and gentlemen' to tour the suburbs, entertaining audiences with songs, Shakespearean and other recitals.<sup>17</sup> He and David COPE junior founded the Sydney Amateur Opera Company in 1896.<sup>18</sup> In 1906 Harry established the Histrionic Society, which gave charitable performances.<sup>19</sup>

His last professional engagement was in Newcastle at Easter 1906 in George DARRELL's drama *The Sunny South*. When he contracted appendicitis fellow thespians organised a very successful benefit performance for him at the Theatre Royal. The program even included a poem composed in his honour by Roderic QUINN.<sup>20</sup>

Harry continued to appear at charity concerts and benefits for other actors. He taught elocution and voice culture to members of the theatrical profession, public speakers, clergymen and barristers until shortly before his death. One of his advertisements proclaimed 'Teaching requires not only a thorough knowledge of one's profession, but a special gift inborn, for imparting knowledge'.<sup>21</sup> This he did to much acclaim. One of his students, Lottie LYELL, an early Australian film star, was praised for her enunciation.

When the curtain closed on Harry's life on 13 July 1923 his funeral was attended by fellow actors, including Raymond LONGFORD, representatives of J C WILLIAMSON, the education department and the Professional Musicians' Association.<sup>22</sup> He was buried in Waverley Cemetery, in company with many of his theatrical colleagues, where 'After life's fitful fever he sleeps well'.<sup>23</sup>

During his career Harry had performed in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane and Tasmania as well as country areas of New South Wales but, so far as I can establish, never further afield. Evidently, like Mrs Crusoe, a character he played in the pantomime *Robinson Crusoe*, described by the *Bulletin's* reviewer as 'a vast seasick person in woman's clothing',<sup>24</sup> he suffered greatly from sea-sickness necessitating his refusal of offers which may have furthered his career.

The reason for his reluctance to travel on water might also be explained by two incidents in which he was involved. When he was 21 Harry and two friends hired a boat on the Yarra River in Melbourne which collided with another boat, throwing everyone out. Harry escaped safely but one of his companions drowned.<sup>25</sup> The second incident, eight years later, occurred on Sydney Harbour. Harry and his brother rescued two people who

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<sup>14</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 17 December 1782 and 11 August 1783, p2.

<sup>15</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 3 May 1890, p2.

<sup>16</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 6, 13, 20 January, 3 February 1906, p2.

<sup>17</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 21 May 1895, p5.

<sup>18</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 1 February 1896, p12.

<sup>19</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 9 January 1906, p2

<sup>20</sup> *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney) 15 September 1906, p11.

<sup>21</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 13 October 1896, p2.

<sup>22</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald* 16 July 1923, p12.

<sup>23</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 3 Scene 2. This quotation is on his grave.

<sup>24</sup> *Bulletin* 4 January 1896, p8.

<sup>25</sup> *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* (Melbourne) 6 November 1871, p199.

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had been sailing in a light skiff which had collided with a wager boat. Their actions were highly commended but the situation must have been frightening.<sup>26</sup>

I have photographs of my great grand uncle Harry LESTON, actor, elocutionist, adjudicator and director. Through my research I have built up a portrait of him, but how I wish I'd met him, seen him act, heard him recite and sing. He deserves the accolade of 'my favourite ancestor'.

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<sup>26</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal* 23 August 1879, p8.