CHAPTER FIVE

"THE NSW AND QUEENSLAND TOURS: 1901-1918, 1927, 1929"

The king of vaudeville no doubt is Harry Clay,
And with his vaudevillians he'll drive dull care away;
He's travelled the Australian states
For twenty years or more,
And is known to many thousands
As the man who holds the floor;
The children coming out from school will shout "Hip, hip, hooray!"
When they see his posters on the wall for good old Harry Clay;
They hail his combination with delight whenever they appear,
And pack theatres nightly when he visits twice a year;
He'll be in this town shortly, so get ready one and all -
To give him a reception, and he'll make a regular call.

Harry Clay

(Theatre Jan. 1920, 26)

As this thesis has already noted, the relationship between Harry Clay's successful career as a Sydney based theatrical showman and his long association with country touring through Northern NSW and Queensland are irrevocably intertwined. As the previous chapters have suggested, and as this one will further investigate, the northern tours initially provided Clay with a capital from which he was able to subsidise the early outlays for his Sydney suburban circuit. His stature throughout Queensland in particular was such that he was able to establish a financial stability that kept the company afloat even during those periods when he was forced to close down the circuit in Sydney. Indeed his reputation and popularity grew so quickly in the north that he was able to dominate the Queensland circuit after only a few years.

Any historical consideration or survey of Harry Clay's organisation, then, requires at the very least an analysis of his northern operations. For not only was his company able to tour these regions annually for eighteen unbroken years - a feat not known to have been matched by any other vaudeville or minstrel company - but in addition, Clay would have been able to justifiably claim that his vaudeville and revue tours were the most popular ever presented in that state. As the following sample of quotations indicates, Harry Clay's presence in Northern NSW and Queensland was well and truly considered a theatrical institution:

(West Maitland): The hall was packed in such a manner as few have ever witnessed. There were no seats available, and every foot of standing room was occupied. Those who went early had a glimpse at the waxworks, those who didn't go early couldn't get near the figures for the great crush. But it was not the waxworks that proved the draw, but the excellent

1 For further examples of quotes and comment, most of which were located during the process of this dissertation’s regional newspaper search, see Appendix I.
artists engaged by Mr Clay, and the evident popularity of the prices (Daily Mercury, Maitland, 7 July 1903: 3).

(Toowoomba): As seasons and successive years roll by, it is unusual to find entertainments improving as the season draws to its close - as a rule they gradually lose their interest - but it is in this feature in Mr Clay's entertainments which has enabled him to achieve the unique success that has rewarded his judgment and ability as a promoter of vaudeville's shows (Toowoomba Chronicle 4 Aug. 1906, 3).

(Gympie): Numerous as have been the different companies that have visited this town, none have been more popular or have met with better success than [Harry Clay's company] (Gympie Times 17 July 1913, 3)

(Charters Towers): Since its inception, over seventeen years ago, Clay's Vaudeville Company has been a household term amongst the amusement lovers of the North, and its annual visit has been welcomed with relish and looked forward to with glad anticipations. Good from the beginning, each recurring visit has seen the company grow stronger in numbers, and more advanced in quality and merit, and its all-round popularity has waxed greater in proportion, til it now holds a unique position in the minds of northern theatre-goers (Northern Miner 26 May 1917, 4)

Harry Clay's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company made their first foray into Queensland in 1901, the year after he and his family had toured with Walter Bell's combination through that state. As will shortly be seen, the similarities of content and style between Bell's and Clay's programmes, as well as the advertising layouts in the regional papers,\(^2\) suggests that Bell's tour was an important influence on the structure and logistics of Harry Clay's initial and subsequent tours. It is likely, too, that Clay's involvement and experiences in the previous tours would have not only allowed him to learn from the proprietors of each company, but also from those responsible for the many different facets of the operations as well. This knowledge and experience was to become an essential part of his own entrepreneurial philosophy - and were, in turn, used not only for the training of his managers but also as a basis for his company's business practice. Charles Norman recalls an aspect of Clay's style, noted in relation to one of his managers Bill Sadler:

In his day Sadler had been a performer touring with the Harry Clay [NSW country and suburban] circuit. Mr Clay himself was a shrewd showman. When travelling through the country with his shows you would see this significant figure in front of the theatre or hall with a bookmaker's bag slung over his shoulder, taking the money and giving the necessary tickets. Harry trusted no man. Bill Sadler came from the same school of thinking. So they learnt their values well (246).

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\(^2\) The similarity between Clay’s advertising layouts throughout all the regional newspapers (a layout not dissimilar to Bell’s) and which does not appear to have been copied by other theatrical companies, suggests that Harry Clay, via his advance representative, was involved with the advertising design rather than this being the responsibility of each newspaper.

These two companies also share a number of similarities with John Rowley's waxworks and vaudeville tours. Rowley, an Englishman, and friend and past associate of Ben Fuller ("Candid and Comprehensive" 30), is known to have toured Queensland in 1897 and 1899. In 1897, as Rowley's Fine Art Waxworks Museum, he included a Gypsy Scientific Palmist, Cosmorama, and Punch and Judy Show in his programmes, while in 1899, under the banner of Rowley's Waxworks Museum and London Co, he presented a Diorama of Ireland, as well as mouth organ and singing competitions.
In comparing the similarities between Clay's and Walter Bell's tours one aspect which stands out is the fact that both presented to all intents and purposes "3 Shows in 1" (Northern Miner 15 Sept. 1900, 1). In this regard both men realised the advantage of providing maximum entertainment value for regional audiences. Thus while variety was certainly the dominant feature of the minstrel/vaudeville format, the ability to attract and sustain large numbers of paying customers from each town's population was seen as requiring more entertainment features. Hence the inclusion of added attractions such as wax models and a Cosmorama. Clay took the concept further, however, with the addition of automatic vending machines and limelight effects (as well as in later years the inclusion of moving pictures). The initial expense of purchasing these extras would no doubt have required of Harry Clay a significant financial outlay, and to this end it is likely that he would have secured the backing of one or more investors to raise the necessary capital. However the on-going costs would have been covered quite easily, particularly in light of the large turn-outs reported in the newspapers. Rail and shipping expenses (the transportation used for both tours) were cost effective in terms of there being no additional outlays (as would have been the case for those companies who used private motor vehicles in later years, for example). Labour costs, too, which involved the use of casual labourers to transport the equipment, sets and scenery from the wharves or railway stations to each venue, can also be considered as having been relatively cheap. Even with the low admission prices of 1/- and 6d for children, the size of the audiences, which ranged around 600 to 1,000 people per night depending on the size of the hall or theatre used, would have created a considerable return.

Another similarity between Bell’s Waxworks tour and Clay’s, apart from the obvious use of wax models and the cyclorama, is the regular inclusion of locals within the programmes. This is most notable through the variety of competitions held, including amateur singing, dancing, mouth organ, best baby and best cat contests etc, along with guessing competitions (whereby a glass jar of money would be shown in a local Shopkeeper's window, and the person to pick the closest amount would win a prize). These aspects of the production, which Clay eventually phased out of his programmes after establishing his shows on their performance merits, were just one of the ways in which the company could involve the community and invite return visits by the locals over the length of each season. He would, however, occasionally reintroduce dancing contests, particularly in response to crazes such as the Tango, with these being accompanied by free instruction to competitors prior to the performance (Toowoomba Chronicle 17 Mar. 1914, 6). Competitions were also very much a part of the children's matinee format (presented on Saturday afternoons), which continued as part of the weekly schedule right through to the final Queensland tour. [See Appendix C for details of children’s matinees] During the early years, too, Clay would further involve himself in communities by sending members of the company, when time afforded it - this being generally on Sundays.

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3 The admission price changed very little over the length of Clay’s tours, as can be seen in Appendix C. Some centres, as with Cairns, for example, required a higher admission charge (2/- and 1/-, with reserved seats 6d extra), and after a few years Clay charged an extra 1/- for dress circle and/or reserved seating in most towns. These ‘popular prices’ were not raised until the 1927 tour.
when there was no travelling required - into a hospital or as in one reported incident, to a nearby aboriginal community.  

It can be argued, then, that Clay's reputation for servicing the regional communities with quality entertainment at low admission prices, along with his desire to position the company in the minds of the locals as something more than a troupe simply passing through, sets his tours apart from virtually all others during the period in question.  

References to the return of the company in many of the local papers after the second or third year consistently locates each town’s relationship with Clay's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company as being one of "our old friends." In this sense, too, Clay is seen to have been able to successfully balance the need for variety and change with that of familiarity. He would, for example, regularly change his artists - whether for each successive tour, or in later years within a tour itself - whereby he would replace a number of artists for the return visits as the company made its way back south - a strategy designed to maximise the potential for audience patronage. On the other hand, he was also aware that several of his artists, and no more so than Ted Tuty and Wally Edwards, along with Frank Herberte and Harry Elliot, had personal followings with the northern audiences, and hence they were regularly included in the tours. That Clay combined his own strategies and ideas with those of other companies he worked for is a logical conclusion. Furthermore it can be argued that his Walter Bell engagement would have been, in effect, the final phase of an experience-gathering period undertaken in order to fine-tune the extensive planning and logistical organisation required prior to the commencement of his tours.

The exact reasoning behind Harry Clay’s decision to eventually focus his touring operations in Queensland is unknown. It is likely, however, that having established his popularity as a minstrel vocalist in that state, through previous tours for other companies, he would have recognised the opportunity to further exploit his name and reputation as a showman and not simply as a performer. In this sense the prospects of getting his "foot in the door" in the relatively untapped northern state would have been preferable to operating in the competitive arena of Victoria and NSW. It is quite feasible that Clay had toured throughout much Australia during his early career (perhaps leading him to initially attempt, as will shortly be discussed, Victorian and Tasmanian tours over the 1901/02 period). And these experiences would have therefore provided him with the ability to assess, early on, a much higher chance of success through concentrating his attention on the Queensland regions. In support of this argument is the evidence provided by a comprehensive search through several Queensland regional newspapers between 1893 and 1900, primarily the Toowoomba  

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4 In 1903 the company visited the Deebing Creek Aboriginal settlement near Ipswich. The Queensland Times notes that "with commendable thoughtfulness Mr Clay arranged for a visit... [to the settlement] yesterday afternoon. Here the programme... proved to be a delightful treat for the children and some older ones who were there. Their enjoyment of the funny business was intense, and when the lollies which the visitors had kindly brought were distributed, their cup was full. It was a nice day for the company, who were struck by the progress made by the young aboriginals. In fact, there was an interchange of entertainment, for the ‘natives’ not only sang some of their songs but gave a corroboree” (16 June 1903, 7).

5 In examining the Queensland regional papers during the 1901-18 period no record was found of any professional touring company offering cheaper admission prices than Clay’s, although some did match his pricing policy.
Rowley's Waxworks
Charters Towers
(Northern Miner 10 Aug. 1899, 1)

Bells Waxworks
Charters Towers
(Northern Miner 20 Sept. 1900, 1)

Plate 41

Chronicle and Northern Miner (Charters Towers), in addition to the Gympie Times and Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton), which indicate that the competition for touring theatrical companies, and not just variety companies, was minimal - there having been very few to make the commitment to tour Queensland up until the turn of the century.\(^6\) And while the proportion of dramatic and opera companies touring the north was

\(^6\) Few theatrical companies made the trip up into northern Queensland between November and April due to the obvious weather conditions. But even during the cooler months the number of companies remained very low. As less than a handful of professional variety companies are known to have toured (on average) each year between 1893 and 1901, a list of the more significant or established ones would include: 1893 - Empire Minstrels; 1894 - Slade Murray's Oxford Co; 1895 - Coghill Brothers New Minstrels; 1896 - Delohery, Craydon and Holland / Harry Rickards New Tivoli Specialty Co; 1897 – Rowley's Fine Art Waxworks Museum; 1898 - J.C. Bain / Lucifer's Athletic-Comedy and Novelty Co; 1899 - Elite Vaudeville and Burlesque Co / The Big Burlesque Boom (Delohery, Craydon and Holland) / Rowley's Waxworks and London Co / J.C. Bain / Tivoli Musical and Comedy Co; 1900 - Orpheus McAdoo's Genuine Georgia Minstrels and Alabama Cake-Walkers / Bell's Waxworks; 1901 - Percy St. John's Royal Burlesque Specialty and Variety Co.
significantly higher than those of the variety kind, their numbers were also much lower than the number on
tour throughout Victoria and NSW during this period.

Another aspect which would have played its part in Clay's decision to give Queensland a trial run, was the
rapidly expanding railway system which made both the coastal and inland centres more accessible than he
had himself experienced prior to this. Indeed, apart from the occasional use of steamers (for those coastal
sections where there were no train lines), rail was Clay's only method of transport between towns. The
Queensland Government, having begun building its railways in 1864, had gradually built up a number of
systems throughout the state, although by 1901 the three major ones - the Great Northern Line, from
townsville to the west; the Central District Line, linking Rockhampton to Longreach etc; and the
Southwestern Line, stretching from Brisbane through to Charleville in the west and north to Gladstone had
not yet been linked. Despite the lack of connecting services, and the requirement to change train systems at
the NSW and Queensland border, rail nonetheless served the practical needs of touring companies like
Clay’s for as long as there were towns of any size positioned along them.

How Harry Clay managed to raise the capital to invest in his first fully fledged tour is also unknown at this
stage. That he apparently continued into NSW, Victoria and Tasmania after the first Queensland leg, rather
than taking early steps towards establishing a Sydney circuit, suggests to some extent, however, that
financial considerations - primarily the recouping of the initial investment - were paramount. In this regard
touring made practical sense in that the likelihood of good sized audiences in entertainment starved regional
centres was high. Furthermore, the competition in Sydney would have placed his success in far more
jeopardy than with the Queensland experiment. Thus it is highly probable that Clay had found himself one,
or several, financial backers, including A.R. Abbot who is believed to have accompanied him on at least part
of the Queensland leg. In support of this is the obvious outlay required for the tour, which apart from the
extra attractions and associated equipment, also included the initial advertising (payment in advance),
telegraph wires (both prior to and during the tour), accommodation, rail and steamer transport, as well as
performers’ salaries, all of which would have required a capital that Clay was unlikely to have been able to
raise without financial support on an investment basis.

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7 Abbot is recorded as arriving in Townsville from Cairns on the same steamer as the Waxworks Co in June 1901 (North
Queensland Register 29 June 1901: “Shipping News”). While it is possible that this may have been a coincidence, the likelihood
that Clay's future partner in Bridge Theatre Pty Ltd was already financially involved with Harry Clay is equally possible.

8 Payment in advance was apparently not required of Clays throughout Queensland in later years. Bob Bell, a prominent end-man
and comedian in Australia during the late 1800s/early 1900s, records in a series of short articles for Australian Variety in 1917,
that "Harry Clay's agent, is I believe, the only man who can go through [Qld] without paying in advance. Clay has a fine name
from North to South, and it is a credit to the fact that he is a thoroughbred Australian" (Bell n. pag.)
It should be mentioned here, though, that Clay certainly did not tour his company on the cheap. Shipping notices during the early years indicate, for example, that his company travelled first class, and it is highly likely that the same applied to the rail travel also.\(^9\) With many of the rail journeys requiring long stretches, and with the added burden of arriving in towns at all hours of the night and day, this consideration of his troupe’s comfort (which certainly did not apply to all touring companies) would have been a deciding factor

\(^9\) There have been a number of examples of these shipping notices found to date - one such example being published in the *Daily Mercury* 9 May 1910, 6, which shows the company departing on the Bullarra for southern ports out of Mackay on the 8th of May - all members in first class.
in the success of the tours. In this regard the performers would have arrived at each destination somewhat
greater than might otherwise have occurred. Travelogues of touring shows published during the first two
decades of the twentieth century abound in tales of problems encountered by companies touring the country
centres - being locked out of hotels in the early morning hours, unsanitary conditions in the small towns, and
the lack of ready assistance at the railways for sets and luggage etc.\(^\text{10}\)

In terms of attempting to capture the essence of Harry Clay's tours through Queensland, however, problems
arise for the researcher with regard to the constant changing of the itinerary and logistical operations. On the
other hand this was very much the pivotal aspect of Clay's continued success in that state, brought about by
constantly adapting his tours to meet whatever changes and requirements were necessary. Whether this
involved the towns and audiences, the programmes, or the artists, Clay persistently maintained the
philosophy of never allowing the paying customers an opportunity to complain about the value or quality of
his shows. And it is this aspect which easily dominates contemporary reports and reviews of his programmes
throughout the state, and indeed throughout all of the tours.

In its January 1916 issue the *Theatre* briefly acknowledged Clay's Queensland tours, noting that:

> Harry Clay has sent a vaudeville company to Queensland regularly every year for the last
seventeen years. The season extends from February to August. Mr Clay plays from twenty
to twenty-five places in Queensland, and from ten to fifteen places in New South Wales on
his way there and back. Nowhere does he open for less than three nights. His longest season
is nine nights, at each of the two Queensland towns, Rockhampton and Townsville (35).

While one or two points are not entirely correct for all the tours - some seasons (generally return visits) are
known to have been less than three nights, while the towns visited on the NSW legs were lesser in number
during the early years - this was essentially the modis operandi for the tours.\(^\text{11}\) The company would
generally start off with seasons west of Sydney (notably Lithgow, Katoomba and Bathurst), then travel by
rail to Newcastle and Maitland where they would again present themselves, before taking the north-west
mail-train through Tamworth to Toowoomba, and across through Ipswich and on to Gympie. After this the
tours would follow several routes north and west through the state, adapting the itinerary each year to suit
their needs. The following list of towns (recorded alphabetically) are those that Harry Clay’s company are
known to have visited during his vaudeville company's nineteen tours:

\[^{10}\] Some interesting articles of this kind include: Frederick Ward's "Country Touring in NSW" (1926), Albert Goldie’s "From
Town to Town: The Joys of Country Showmen" (1917), and a series published in *Green Room* over 1918-19 titled "Through
Queensland with 'Yours Radiantly,'" a highly amusing account of a picture show agent’s promotional tour for Paramount Pictures
during that period. Citations for these are included in the bibliography.

\[^{11}\] As previously mentioned, a great deal of information regarding the Queensland tours is provided in Appendix C. This includes
the names of artists, managers, operators, musical directors etc, known to have toured, as well as known itinerary dates, farces,
films and miscellaneous attractions etc.
As the length of visits to the major centres contracted, these being primarily the coastal towns, along with Toowoomba, Ipswich and Charters Towers, Clay would open up new places which had not been visited previously due to their smaller size. As he himself notes in speaking "enthusiastically of Queensland as a great state" to the Theatre in its October 1911 issue. "Towns are springing up that you would never have dreamt of playing in a few years ago. To-day you can take a good-sized company into them, with most payable results" (29).

Similarly the NSW sections would also be adapted over time, playing shorter seasons in the major centres, with the slack being taken up by visiting those centres further afield - places such as Moree, Gunnedah, Werris Creek and Inverell. During the early years, however, a town had to be of sufficient size to attract Clay’s attention. Thus while places such as Armidale and Glen Innis, for example, were situated along the north-west mail line, they were initially left off the itinerary because their smaller populations could not support a show the size of Clay's (Tamworth News 1 Aug. 1904, 2).

Although Harry Clay's knowledge of Queensland obviously played its part in the establishment of the circuit, the duties undertaken by his advance representative were also an essential part of the success of each tour. This position was initially filled by Jimmy Boyle, the dapper little Englishman whose friendship with Harry Clay apparently lasted until his death in 1924 - some three months prior to Clay's. The advance rep's job was to organise the tour from Sydney during the months prior to its commencement, writing letters to secure venues and to notify local newspapers, booking accommodation, contacting the bill poster in each town, and any other necessary arrangements. This was naturally done in consultation with Clay, who would plan the logistical aspects first. In the days prior to the company leaving on tour the rep would travel ahead, arriving in each centre with dodgers, day bills and posters, which it may be assumed were given to local

12 During the first ten years centres such as Townsville, Rockhampton and Charters Towers would attract a season of around ten nights, with most of the other large towns being played for between three to seven nights. After this period the length of the seasons declines, although the shows still continued to attract large to full houses. It seems, however, that the tours could not maintain the numbers over the larger spread of nights. During the second decade of these tours Clay's policy of low admission prices, at odds with the general rise in costs, required him to play more compact seasons (with large attendances) rather than longer ones with smaller attendances.
youths to distribute in exchange for free tickets (as with his Sydney and NSW country circuits). He would also arrange and oversee the newspaper and hall advertising, before travelling on to the next town along the itinerary.

As essential as the advance rep was to the smooth running of each tour, in a sense the promotional aspects involved in country touring during this era required a somewhat lesser (or perhaps different) level of attention and expenditure than was required in order to run a city circuit. In support of this a 1908 *Theatre* magazine article records, "news travels fast in the country, and a show of any sort, [is] always advertised from town to town by the coach passengers, and the commercial travelers" ("Spangles" 15). However, as with today's theatrical advertising campaigns, the response by the public to a show would be very much a matter of how it was perceived by them. One particular viewpoint on country touring during the period is expressed by Albert Goldie, who in writing for the *Theatre* in June 1917, records:

> Country people turn over a coin till they know the date by heart before they spend it in amusement... The showman in the country is regarded as a species of spieler, whose chief mission is to 'take money out of the town.' He is deeply resented at first, and if he succeeds in paying his way a few times he comes to be tolerated. And this is the most he can hope for. The only way to make oneself popular with country audiences is to make speeches from the stage, thanking them for their patronage, and telling them that they are the most intelligent audience that it has ever been your pleasure to appear before. Poor old Dan Barry never missed a chance in this respect. It is said of him that he would go around from house to house delivering dodgers, mainly to pat children on the head, and tell their mothers what little dears they were (10).

Clay and his advance rep's usual method was to make an initial (paid) announcement of his intended season some ten days or so prior to the company’s visit, followed by further advertisements one or two days immediately before the start. During a season, however, he would rarely advertise every issue (if printed daily), the method being to leave a gap of a day (or sometime two) between insertions. In this sense he was most likely utilising his reputation as a drawcard, in addition to generating word of mouth advertising within each community through the shows themselves, rather than rely on the unnecessary cost brought about by over-saturation in the newspapers.

During the first four years the tours were known as Clay's Waxworks and Vaudeville Company, and presented the same style of programme as Clay's would become renowned for on the Sydney circuit, but with the inclusion of the special attractions. The doors would generally open at 7.15 or 7.30, allowing the audience time to socialise and peruse the waxworks and Cosmorama, operate the "penny gaff" machines - which dispensed such things as sweets, delineations of a person's character, or showed scenic views of exotic places or wars - the Boer war being particularly popular during the first few years. Musical selections would also be played from audio machines such as the theatrephone, which Maitland's *Daily Mercury* described as working "on the same principle as the gramophone" (19 Feb. 1901, 2).
Very little information concerning the Cosmorama exhibitions toured by Harry Clay throughout Queensland between 1901 and 1908 has been located, despite a comprehensive search of newspapers. The only clues to be found are in the limited descriptions used by the various reviewers. Words such as "stereoscopic views," and "illuminated scenes," have been noted, for example, while the Queensland Times recorded that "through the agency of the Cosmorama patrons may have a peep at the views of London and Paris by night" (7 Apr. 1904, 9). In light of such information, then, it seems probable that he toured an optical picture exhibition that consisted of a portable box with a lens at the front, and through which one looked. At the rear, and illuminated by some sort of light would be either one or two small paintings (two if the exhibition was in fact a stereoscopic one), and on either side would be panels, creating a tunnel, and thus providing the spectator with the illusion of depth.¹³

The waxworks, which in 1903 were reported as numbering around fifty (Daily Mercury 7 Mar. 1903, 2), would also be positioned around the auditorium as well as in the foyer area alongside the various automatic machines. The figures were frequently changed and added to, particularly the criminal characters. "As fresh crimes are discovered, figures of the perpetrators are added to the collection," noted the Queensland Times (7 Apr. 1904, 7) in relation to the company's Ipswich season. Some of the most popular waxworks in the collection over the years included the Governor brothers ("the Breelong Blacks"), who were presented in tableaux; the Kenniff family (Queensland's recently captured and tried rustlers and murderers); and sportspeople such as Bill Squires (Australian heavyweight contender) and cricketer Victor Trumper. Others included dignitaries such as the Royal family, popes, famous soldiers and politicians. In researching those people represented by the figures [a list of models known to have been toured is included as part of Appendix C] it becomes clear that many of these waxworks were very current to the population's awareness or imagination, lending further credence to the notion that Clay was intent on presenting "up to the minute entertainment" on these tours.

Central to this period of the evening's entertainment, however, was the role of the tour manager, whose job it was to collect the money, issue tickets, usher people to their seats and more importantly to meet with and make his acquaintance with the locals. It is most likely that Harry Clay would have undertaken this role himself in the early years of touring (in addition to being the business manager), with the responsibility taken on by Jimmy Boyle for many years after 1905. With his stage commitments requiring his nightly attention on these tours, it can be assumed that even prior to 1905 Clay would have had to employ someone to assist him with these duties, however. It is believed that Bert Howard may well have undertaken this role when he toured with Clay. As Jimmy Boyle is not known to have been a performer, it can be assumed that

¹³ The first Cosmorama was opened in Paris in 1808, with a London exhibition opening for the first time in 1820. The word Cosmorama was initially used to designate an astronomical exhibition, but was later adopted as a synonym for a superior grade of peepshow. In subsequent years they were sometimes called Diorama or Panorama exhibitions (Altick, 211-212). There is some suggestion that rather than being Cosmoramas, Harry Clay's "peep shows" were instead stereoscopic exhibitions, and that the term Cosmorama had been applied for reasons unknown. [See Appendix C, p114, for further details]
from 1905 onwards he took on both the tour and business managing roles, as Wally Edwards would in later years, he having retired from performing by that stage. Between the advance rep and the tour manager, much information about the local community could be gathered. Both were required to remember information such as faces and names for future reference. In this way Clay's tours were able to locate themselves within the community more or less as visiting friends rather than just a theatrical company passing through.

The program proper would begin at 8pm, and up until 1917 consisted of the first-part minstrel format and second-part olio [as described in Chapter Two]. In the early years, the role of interlocutor would naturally be taken by Harry Clay, who also doubled as tenor and illustrated singer [discussed later]. The musical accompaniment for virtually all the tours was simply a piano, played for the first five years by T.W. Rhodes. The role of Music Director was perhaps the most important in terms of the company's performance, he or she being responsible not only for accompaniments, but also for providing punctuation for comic instances - this role traditionally being the domain of a percussionist. It is likely that a programme could succeed if one or two turns failed to work successfully on any particular night, but without strong performances night after night by the pianist, a touring show could quite possibly fail to attract the required patronage for that season or any other.

Although unfavourable criticism of acts or shows rarely occurred in newspapers and trade journals until sometime around the end of the second decade of the twentieth century 14 (and thus it becomes difficult to establish an accurate reflection of their quality), the audiences were very able (and vocal) in their appreciation of the differences in the quality of the turns on show. As this thesis has already mentioned in Chapter One, Charles Norman's recollection of his days touring Clay's NSW country circuit suggests that the audiences were quite knowledgeable and aware of performers' abilities and shortfalls. With regard, then, to the music director (and musicians in general) on these tours, Norman further recalls the professionalism and talents that these people brought with them, and the integral role they played in each night's performance:

They knew the show, and they knew how to handle the show. My word they were great. They knew how to keep the applause going and so forth. They were very useful indeed. Yes, exactly. Oh they were good....We depended on them. They were excellent. Their timing was great. They understood the show beautifully (Appendix H, 209).

14 An example of the change in this general attitude towards criticism can be seen in the 25 Mar. 1920 issue of Australian Variety in which the editor announced that "during the past few months, much of the policy of our vaudeville write-ups has been changed. For too long we had allowed inferior acts to pass muster with the best offerings on the programme, and for just such a length of time, we had refrained from stirring up performers for serving up the same old 'junk'... This time we decided to be a little more critical in our opinions, and have carried out this idea" (4).
THEATRE ROYAL

To-Night. To-Night.

Clay’s Waxworks and Vaudeville Company,

with all the LATEST NOVELTIES from London and Paris.

SPLENDID WAX TABLEAUX, including the Breslong Blacks.

10 Star Variety Artists. 10

1s. ADMISSION. 1s.
Children under 10 Half Price.

Doors open 7.15. Entertainment 8 p.m.

JAMES W. BOYLE,
Advance Rep.

Gympie
(Gympie Times 26 Mar. 1901, 2)

SCHOOL OF ARTS

TO-NIGHT. TO-NIGHT.

LAST NIGHT. LAST NIGHT.

CLAY’S WAXWORKS

Free Gifts. Free Gifts.

EVERYONE RECEIVES A GIFT.

Admission, 1s.; Children under ten, half-price.
Overture, 8 o'clock.

Maryborough
(Maryborough Chronicle 26 Apr. 1902, 1)

PUBLIC NOTICES

WIRTH BROS.
GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

TO-NIGHT at 8, GRAND SPECTACULAR PAGEANT, representing the GRAND DURBAR OF DEHLI, in which the whole of London's great company will appear.

PRICES, 4s., 3s., and 2s.
Children, Half-price in all Parts.

All Accounts paid at the Green Office at 11 o'clock this morning.

TOWN HALL.

TO-NIGHT. LAST NIGHT.

CLAY’S COMEDY COMPANY.

ENTIRE CHANGE OF PROGRAMME.

ADMISSION, 6d.; FRONT SEATS AND CIRCLE, 1d. CHILDREN UNDER 10, HALF PRICE.

TOWN HALL

This Afternoon

GRAND CHILDREN’S PERFORMANCE.

PRIZES WILL BE GIVEN FOR THE FOLLOWING COMPETITIONS:

FOR GIRLS—
BEST DRESSED DOLL: Rolled Gold Baby, value 50s.
BEST ENGLISH RECITATION: Ladies Dancing Dress, value 10s.
BRILLIANT DRESSED DOLL: Rolled Gold Baby, value 15s.

CHILDREN, 3d.; ADULTS, 6d.

TOWN HALL

Toowoomba
(Toowoomba Chronicle 4 July 1906, 1)

Amusements.

THEATRE ROYAL

TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT!

LAST NIGHT OF

L A Y S

WAXWORKS AND COMPANY.

GRAND REQUEST NIGHT.

NEW ILLUSTRATED SONGS.

NEW MOVING PICTURES.

The Bottle of Money will be given away in the Theatre To-night.

1/- ADMISSION.
Children under Ten Half-price.

TOWN HALL

THIS AFTERNOON, at 2.15 o'clock,
A SPECIAL PERFORMANCE FOR CHILDREN.

All Children, 3d.; Adults, 6d.

Charters Towers
(Norther Miner 4 July 1908, 1)

Plate 43
Mackay
(Daily Mercury 4 May 1910, 2)

Gympie
(Gympie Times 10 June 1916, 3)

Charters Towers
(Northern Miner 27 June 1918, 2)
In his autobiography, Roy Rene provides a useful account of the vaudeville first part as it was presented around the time he was engaged by Harry Clay:

Vaudeville in those days was a very different proposition from the theatre of to-day. When I was first working, even revues were unknown. To begin with, the curtain didn't go up on a ballet of beautiful girls dancing across the stage. The ballet and chorus were one, and we called them seat-warmers, they used to sit round the back of the stage, and though all of them could sing, they didn't all dance. The curtain goes up and there is the whole company on stage with the chorus seat-warming. Then two cornermen on each side and the interlocutor right in the middle. The corner men would strike up on the bones and kettle drums and go into their minstrel act, and then the interlocutor with a real flourish would say at the beginning of the opening chorus, "Ladies and gentlemen, be seated." Then he'd call out, "Ladies and gentlemen, Boy Roy, the comic singer," and I'd come off the corner while the other performers gave me a hand and helped build me up, and I'd do my act and go back on the corner. Then he'd call out, "Miss So-and-so." She might be a famous singer or a comic act, but she'd get up and come forward and do her turn and go back to her seat when it was over.

Of course when the curtain first rose we wouldn't all be sitting looking half alive. Everyone would be doing their business and the jugglers juggling, and so on. All those acts would go on until the 9 o'clock interval... (52-53)

Plate 45
[Left] A young Ted Tutty
[Right] Ted Tutty in blackface ca.1951 (at Sammy Lee’s)
Without doubt Harry Clay’s most consistently popular Qld tourist, Tutty was said to have been to Clay what Irving Sayles was to Harry Rickards
(Photographs courtesy of Jo Mercer and Del Buchanan)
From 1905 Clay would sometimes depart from the established minstrel format by closing the first-part with a short moving picture, or a specialty act - generally an advertised attraction. After the interval the traditional second-part, the olio, would begin, often starting with a solo piano piece, followed by what many saw as the evening’s highlight presentation, this being the Illustrated Songs. These specialty turns would continue their popularity well into the second decade of Clay's involvement in Queensland. They were performed to background scenery and mood visuals, created at first through limelight lanterns and slides, and later with film, both of which were thrown onto a large white sheet on the stage. Almost always sung by the premier vocalists on each tour - artists such as Harry Clay, Stan Kerridge, Wally Edwards, Frank Herberte, May Reade, and Thelma Woods, to name the most popular, they were also extensively promoted in newspaper advertising.

The inclusion of the "illustrated song" meant that the company needed the services of an operator. During the first four years this was in the capacity of a limelight projectionist, the person who not only presented the visuals effects for those songs but was also responsible for projecting spotlight effects onto the stage through the same machine. Later, the role of operator also involved the screening of the moving pictures as well. Some of these men, like longtime Clay employee, Lou Courtney, doubled as entertainers - he being renowned for an equilibrist turn, which included plate spinning. During the early part of the century, too, they often received public recognition for their role. Courtney, A.T. McIntyre, and in later years, Les Cannis, were regularly mentioned in advertising, with Courtney, for example, being described in 1910 as "the well-known electrician" (Queensland Times 19 Mar. 1910, 4). Limelight projecting was a particularly difficult operation, necessitating long periods of intense concentration as a combination of gasses was manipulated. The projectionists also needed to respond to the intimate movements of the artists and each programme's lighting requirements. Some reviews of these Illustrated Songs present an idea of their effect, as in the Maitland Daily Mercury of 1904:

> The dissolving effects and the representations of a snow storm were beautiful and realistic. The lantern is of the latest American pattern, and the pictures are thrown on the screen sharply and clearly (10 Mar. 1904, 2).

While the Northern Miner in 1905 described the entertainment thus:

> A feature of particular merit about the performances given by Mr Clay are the picture songs. The music of these is both new and pretty. They are admirably sung, and the manner in which the company's operator, Mr MacIntyre, manipulates the lantern, particularly in the matter of getting the beautiful dissolving effects which he secures, supplies all that is

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15 Limelight projecting consisted of a block of lime (or calcium) heated to incandescence by impinging jets of burning oxygen and hydrogen onto it, and focusing this through a lens onto the stage. Slides would be used to create the visual images, and by manipulating the intensity of the lime block, effects such as dissolving scenes etc could be presented. Limelight operating required considerable attention, as the calcium needed constant adjustment, as did the cylinders of oxygen and hydrogen. Prior to the advent of cylinders, these gasses were transported in canvas bags, which according to reports, tended to leak all too often. Manipulating these bags meant that the operator had to squeeze them with his feet under pressure boards. Sometimes, however, audience members standing or seated next to the planks would inadvertently apply added pressure to the gasses, causing various problems for the operator such as extra light (Gunn 126).
necessary to make these contributions absolutely the best of their kind ever seen on the local stage (22 May 1905, 7).

Following on from the illustrated songs the olio would again consist of separate turns. As previously explained, this second-part did not require the other members of the company to sit around in the minstrel semi-circle while an act was working. This section of the programme also differed from the first in that it presented more partnership acts (pairings of individual artists, not just regular partnerships), as well as specialty performances. Any specialised drop sheets used by each act to mask the following act's preparation, it seems, would have been their own responsibility - as it is known, for instance, that Clay's scenic artist Alec Stagpoole (who worked for the company from around 1915 onwards) specialised in designing cloths for performers. The rights to these sheets, and primarily their design, were considered to be copyrighted by the performers. There were several instances when warnings were published by the owners regarding the copying of the designs.

Between 1905 and 1913, the second part would also include one or several films (if not shown in the first part). These were invariably advertised as having been purchased from overseas (mostly England and America), and as being screened by the latest machines (also imported). In 1906, for instance, the projector used was the Sperantoscope, described as the very latest – "being driven by a motor [and giving] the best moving picture" (Gympie Times 7 July 1906, 3). The film screenings were, naturally, an enormously popular attraction during Clay's early tours, but it seems that by 1912 the professional cinema showmen could better present them, and thus they were no longer included in his programmes.

Plate 46
Maud Fanning "Australia’s Premier Coon Singer" and her youngsters, Huia, Violet and Lalla.
(Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, NSW)
The programmes always finished with a short "screaming farce," in which many of the performers returned to take up roles. Indications are that during the early years at least, most of these farces seem to have been around for some time, if not always having been toured through the areas that Clay's operated. After about 1910, however, several are known to have been written by Clay's own performers who later became professional revue writer/producers. This suggests that the farces became an early creative learning process for them prior to the advent of the revue. But it would not be until 1917, the year after the emergence of the revue as a popular feature on Clay's Sydney suburban and NSW country circuits, that they became part of the Queensland programmes.

While Harry Clay's waxworks, vaudeville and revue tours make up the bulk of his known touring operations through Queensland, it is also known that he made several attempts at serious dramatic tours during this time, too. In 1908, for instance, he sent the first of such tours through the state, with his daughter Essie in the principal female roles. Under the banner of Clay's Dramatic Company, it is believed the 20 or so actors and stage crew began the tour in or around Rockhampton, there being no other dates found so far that predate that season. The company's itinerary then seems to have included the coastal towns south as far as Gympie, before crossing to Toowoomba. It can be presumed that they then made their way back to Sydney along the vaudeville company's usual northern NSW leg.

The tour's advance representative was Jack Campbell, later to manage Clay's 1913 Queensland tour, while Harry Clay led the tour himself. Presenting four productions, The World Against Her, The Irishman, Camille, and The Marriage of Mary Anne, the tour received mixed reviews, depending both on the town played and the section of the tour. In this sense it seems that the company, and particularly Essie Clay, got much better as it went along. However, several reviewers found that Miss Clay's age and lack of dramatic experience worked against her to a certain extent, most notably in the role of Camille. The company did, however, contain several very experienced actors, most notably John Cosgrove, Harry Norman (previously a Bland Holt Co stage manager), and Sydney Everett. In addition to these were Lancelot Vane (Jim Gerald's brother) and Albert Lucas, the company's young lead actor. Another cast member was Walter Whyte, late of the J.C. Williamson Repertoire Company, and at the time arguably the country's leading tenor. Harry Clay and Will Wynand, who would work for Clay's vaudeville company over the next four years or so, also accompanied the tour as singer and comic-actor respectively.

16 John Cosgrove was an actor considered by many of his contemporaries as one of the great characters of his day. With a brilliant mind for acting and writing, and one of Australia's early film pioneers, he nonetheless failed to reach the height of his profession due to, as George Lauri puts it, "the vagabond streak within him." Lauri also calls him the "unlicensed jester of Poverty Point... [the] Crown prince of pretense, gay cavalier of cadgerdom," and one whose "wit was a sparkling as his impudence sublime." Cosgrove is supposed to have said of himself that he was one who "loitered along life's highway with hand outstretched to every man" (35).

17 Early in 1909 Whyte's services were secured for the production Elijah, mounted by the Sydney Philharmonic Society, and is known to have worked variously in theatre as well as in vaudeville for Clay's, J.C. Bain, Fullers. He toured England around 1912.
While the reviews of the productions suggest that the company was on the whole neither bad nor brilliant, the relatively large turn-outs and the generally good response to the plays by those audiences no doubt stimulated Clay’s desire to give Queensland another try with regard to dramatic productions. Perhaps sensing the need to present something out of the ordinary - in order to keep his reputation in the minds of the Queensland public at the same level as his vaudeville tours had been doing - Clay arranged a company to support the celebrated Scottish tragedian, Walter Bentley, through that state. Bentley, then aged sixty, and a former acting associate of Henry Irving, had toured Australia on a number of occasions from 1891, presenting notable productions such as The Silver King, Rob Roy, David Garrick, Richard the III, and arguably his finest Shakespearian role as Hamlet. This 1909 tour, then, was to present Harry Clay with the biggest drawcard of his entrepreneurial career to that stage. [A profile on Bentley appears in Appendix G]

Bentley had reportedly enjoyed a highly successful ten night season at Sydney's Criterion Theatre immediately prior to the Clay tour, presenting Hamlet under the direction of Stanley McKay. While Clay arranged to provide his own company of actors to support Bentley, it is believed that he purchased the scenery and costumes from McKay for his tour, these being designed and produced respectively by Harry Whaite who was arguably Australia's leading stage designer, and Zenda, one of Sydney's leading costume makers. The Theatre wrote of Bentley's Criterion season:

It is good for a big city to get a shock now and then; and by Jehosophat! it got it in the Walter Bentley season.... After his season of ten nights at the Criterion... [he] was presented with a diamond pin and a purse of 65 golden sovereigns by his admirers. This was in addition to houses that amazed theatre-goers. The Criterion was packed at 7.30 nightly, and people stood three and four deep merely to hear the actor’s voice - for they couldn’t possibly see him. It is too late in the day to presume to criticise Walter Bentley as a Shakespearian actor. Intellectual, emotional and magnetic personality that he is, it is only left to ask what on earth managers are thinking of to foist actors like Oscar Asche on Australia when Bentley is at hand and free. To see Bentley enter, cross, and leave the stage is an education in deportment. He does not strut like Irving, nor does he heavily move like Asche... Unfortunately, Mr McKay... was unable to get an extension of his short lease on the theatre, otherwise the Bentley season would have flourished long 18 ("Criterion" 18).

Walter Bentley's Queensland tour, which was produced by Clay and included Essie Clay in the lead female roles, opened in Brisbane's His Majesty's Theatre on the 4th of September. The opening production, Hamlet, had been specially prepared by Bentley from the 1623 folio. The Brisbane Courier records that it “retained the finer and more interesting scenes, and [in] concentrating the more powerfully dramatic portions of Shakespeare’s tragedy, has lost that which was generally considered to delay the denouement, while not adding interest by reason of irrelevancy’ (30 Aug. 1909, 2). Other productions toured by the 23 strong

18 McKay had been notified that the Criterion was to be free for a fortnight some months before he engaged Walter Bentley. He apparently arranged the season with the Scottish actor prior to his departure for a season in Adelaide where he was to present The Silver King. According to the Theatre, the young burgeoning entrepreneur was ‘seriously handicapped in his negotiations with Mr Bentley, and his preparations generally for the production. But in two and a half weeks - which was all the time Mr McKay had - he formed a company to support Mr Bentley, who only returned to Sydney for the final rehearsals three or four days before opening night. It proved to be the most successful Shakespearian season Mr Bentley ever played’ (Nov. 1910 n. pag.).
troupe of actors included: The Courier of Lyons, David Garrick, The Bells: Or the Murder of the Polish Jew, Crammond Brig: or The King and the Miller (a one act Scottish comic-drama), and His Last Legs (a one act comedy) - the last two being presented each night after either David Garrick or The Bells.

It has been recorded that this tour by Clay's provided many centres with their first presentation of professionally staged Shakespeare since Bentley last toured the north in 1898 (Maryborough Chronicle 20 Sept. 1909, 2), and indeed, even the Brisbane Courier notes that Shakespearian productions in that city had been at "rare intervals" during that period (6 Sept. 1909, 6) Bentley's performances were routinely praised by the Queensland reviewers, as were Essie Clay’s representations. It is believed that after the previous year's tour she undertook private tuition with both the eminent actor/teacher Harry Leston, and one of George Rignold's regular leading actresses, Roland Watts-Phillips. Also taking leading roles in the company were J.B. Atholwood, S.A. Fitzgerald, Johnston Weir and Helen Furgus, along with Maurice Nodin and Lance Vane. Len Buderick, later engaged as a NSW country circuit manager by Clay, also toured with the company as an actor.

Plate 47
Walter Bentley
(Courtesy of the John Oxley Library, Queensland)

19 These four were among the leading local actors of the period, with Atholwood in particular renowned for his work during the previous two decades. Fitzgerald was the father of Jim Gerald and Lance Vane. Weir later became highly involved in the industrial aspects of the theatre industry - notably through his role as Secretary of the NSW Branch of the Australian Actors Federation. Veteran actress Helen Furgus was also the mother of actress Nellie Ferguson.
The tour was managed by Jimmy Boyle, who took the company along the usual coastal itinerary in the wake of the company's specially engaged advance rep, Claude E. Webb. After heading north by steamer following the Maryborough season, they played Townsville and Charters Towers before returning south through Mackay, Rockhampton, Mt Morgan, Bundaberg and finally Toowoomba. Although considerably successful in terms of critical appraisal and audience numbers, it seems that this was to be Clay's last dramatic company tour of the north. Some two years later, however, he would again act as producer for a Queensland tour, this time easily the biggest production of his career, the massive Stanley McKay pantomime production of Bo-Pep.

Around mid 1911, and in response to the enormous popularity of his Sydney pantomime season over the previous summer holidays, Stanley McKay mounted an extensive Queensland tour under the auspices of Harry Clay’s organisation. While many details of this tour remain unearthed it is known that the company, numbering some 38 performers (not including stage crew and labourers), presented several productions beneath a gigantic tent (described as a mining tent), these being Bo-Pep, The Carnival Girls, and The Circus Queen. The cast, which included 20 ballet girls, was headed by Bruce Drysdale, Phyllis Faye, and Vicky Miller (Bo-Pep), while the management was taken care of by McKay (Director), Harry Clay (Producer), Jimmy Boyle (Business Manager) and Walter V. Hobbs (Tour Manager).

Press reviews of the production were unanimous in praising its spectacle, the settings (designed again by Harry Whaite) being "mounted on an elaborate scale" (Northern Miner 19 June 1911, 4). The tent, which seated over 2,000 people, was itself a significant drawcard for the townsfolk of the north - taking several days to erect and dismantle. Promotion throughout the tour insisted that it was the ‘largest combination that has yet toured the Commonwealth under mining canvas’ (Northern Miner 19 June 1911, 4). But although the costs of running the tour would have been considerable, this tour, unlike that of the Clay/Bentley venture, for example, frequently visited centres away from the large coastal centres. These were mostly mining towns - places such as Chillagoe and Irvinebank in the Cairns Hinterland, and presumably those towns west of Charters Towers, such as Richmond and Hughenden. The Queensland leg of the Bo-Pep tour ended in Mackay, from whence the company made an extraordinarily long journey to the Riverina to make a show date for the start of another NSW tour (McKay 42).

With regard to the reviews of the tour, too, almost all wrote of amazement at the transformation scene "Under the Waves," which concluded the Bo-Pep production - Harry Whaite's brilliant set coming in for special mention. Other reviews, such as that in the Rockhampton Record, found "the beauty, talent and grace of the Bo-Pep ballet... an excellent illustration of the success of Australian womankind" (quoted in the Northern Miner 19 June 1911, 4). Each season would be complimented by one of the other productions,

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20 Webb is another theatrical showman who established a prominent reputation in later years, most notably in the picture theatre area in Adelaide, managing for many years the York, Strand and Lyric theatres in that city. Some further details are included as part of Appendix E.
presumably to invite those locals who had seen the major presentation to return again - and particularly in light of the presentation of the bevy of chorus girls interspersed within the narrative of these two musical comedies.

The 1911 pantomime tour seems to have been the last of its type to be toured by Harry Clay through Queensland, including dramatic productions. From around 1912 it becomes noticeable that economic conditions were becoming increasingly difficult throughout much the state creating, in turn, problems for Clay's Queensland operations. In response to this situation it appears that he decided to concentrate his energies on the vaudeville tours. Reports such as the following one published in the Theatre indicate,
however, that Clay still believed there was money to be made if the organisation altered its strategies. Writing from Charters Towers on the 12th of May 1912, he notes:

We are still going along our usual way. Business has been just as good as ever. Of course, it's very hard to play the north as the halls are tied up to the picture-people, and if you do get into their halls you have got to pay for it. In Mackay they would not allow me the hall at a reasonable price, with the result that I had to go to a place that was a long walk away from the main street: but our popularity followed us, and we did just as well as we could have done in the popular hall of the town. The company that had the hall did not use it; they played in their open-air place. So we got even with them. Queensland on the whole is improving. It will be a fine country. Of course, one or two mining towns have gone back greatly; but others have come on; so matters are equalised. There is one thing against companies travelling north - the boats are erratic. In many instances they arrive 30 or 40 hours late. The recent strike has done some places a lot of harm; but they will soon recover. You know that Queensland is a great country in recovering from droughts, floods etc (June 1912, 6).

By 1915, with both the war and the drought conditions throughout most of Queensland imposing much hardship on the north, many changes in Clay's itineray were put in place. The company began visiting a number of towns it had never before played, competing by this stage not only with the social and environmental hardships, but also with the rapidly expanding picture show industry. Halls and theatres once considered Clay's domain were, as he recorded in 1912, now much more difficult to book while in many towns new picture houses were being built, creating a great deal of competition where there had once been very little. As Clay again notes in the September 1915 issue of the Theatre:

George Carroll and E.J. Carroll are blanky good fellows. For one thing, they keep their word - which is more than a lot of the blanks do. Despite the fact that the Queensland halls are mostly engaged by Birch and Carroll they allow me to play there just as I had been doing for years. With more profitable results to themselves they could if they wished, close me out altogether (25).

Early the following year Clay reported on his 1915 tour in the same magazine, declaring that:

Townsville was my best place last year. But my last trip was not on the whole a very good one, because of the drought. One of the places that I found to have suffered most was Ayr. It was going ahead in a wonderful manner; but the want of rain knocked it back terribly (Theatre Jan 1916, 35).

Despite these difficulties business continued to be relatively successful, even during the final two years. Confirming this, for example, is a 1917 review in the Northern Miner (Charters Towers) which notes that "when the curtain was rolled up at the Theatre Royal at 8 o'clock on Saturday night there was not even standing room in the huge auditorium - eloquent testimony of the popularity of this grand old company of entertainers" (4 June 1917, 3). However, it would be the flu epidemic of 1919 that effectively closed the door on these tours, with Harry Clay most probably deciding that his Sydney circuit offered greater returns.

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21 An indication of the audience size at this venue suggests, then, a crowd in excess of 1,200 - this being the seating capacity of the Theatre Royal ("To Theatrical Companies" 2).
by this time. And indeed, it would be nine years before his company mounted another tour of the north, this
time most likely an attempt to keep the company's then flagging business afloat.

Some two years after Clay's death in 1925 the company, now under the stewardship of Maurice Chenoweth
and the financial control of Clay's partners Abbot and Morgan, the company instigated a return trial of its
Queensland tours in an apparent effort to stimulate its declining fortunes. In this regard the decision to tour
a company with the headline act of Nellie Kolle was seemingly a good one - the reviews of the tour being
highly positive. By now, however, the tide of change had well and truly turned against vaudeville, placing
Clay's in an almost impossible position. The company's fight for survival against both the film industry and
the economic climate in Sydney was difficult enough. But in addition a great many country centres had also
taken to the talkies (almost always at the expense of live theatre). The combination of much higher
expenses, smaller audiences, and the general downturn in interest for vaudeville itself had therefore severely
handicapped vaudeville companies like Clay's. The Kolle tour was, then, most probably a chance to test an
alternative to the situation the company now found itself in.

The Nellie Kolle tour was again managed by Wally Edwards, who would have been by now well into his
late fifties. Despite the length of time between tours, interest in the return of Clay's was apparently quite
high, there still being many people who had regularly attended the shows in previous years. A number of
changes, however, were brought into play - no doubt in an attempt to make the programmes more
contemporary. Instead of touring with only a piano as accompaniment, for instance, the management utilised
the services of their own jazz band. Gone, too, were the farces and revues of yesteryear, replaced instead by
short musical comedies. On the other hand, Clay's philosophy of complete changes to each night's
programme, low admission prices, and a highly entertaining bill of artists, was very much in evidence.

Kolle, herself, made quite an impression throughout the tour, her impersonations and piano work in
particular coming in for much praise. One critic wrote: "Her mastery of the piano is perhaps her greatest
talent. Her touch is sure and firm and the result of this all too rare gift is a clarity in the music which makes
it a treat to listen to" (Toowoomba Chronicle 19 Mar. 1927, 5). Others on the tour who came in for special
mention were American comic Bessie Lester, dancing violinist Sydney Clarke, and Julian the French
cartoon artist billed as "the Komedy Kartoonist."

It is not known for certain whether Clay's sent any other tours through Queensland under Harry Clay's name
before the company folded in 1929. Victoria Chance in the Companion to Australian Theatre indicates that
Roy Rene toured the state for the company in mid-1929, just days after his marriage to Sadie Gale (Philip
Parsons 485). As previously mentioned in Chapter Three, research for this thesis has not been able to

22 The general admission price seems to have been 2/- and 1/- (with children 6d at the Saturday matines). In the far northern
centres the more exclusive seats, reached prices of 4/4, and 3/3. However, 2/- and 1/- seats were always available.
establish through any primary sources whether this tour had indeed been underwritten by Clay's, although this was quite possibly the case. It is known that both Rene and Gale had been on the Clay circuit from around April of that year, with their own company the Merry Monarchs (formed after Rene’s final split with Nat Phillips in 1928). The troupe, which initially included Amy Rochelle, is known to have provided full shows at the Gaiety Theatre during this time in addition to Rene's own solo work. While there is no mention of Clay's in any advertising found for the Queensland tour so far, it is quite likely that the company did indeed underwrite and organise the tour - particularly as Rene was apparently in no financial position to do so himself.23

Relying heavily on Mo's reputation, the company's advertising often simply announced "Mo, Mo, Mo," with Gale's name also in bold print. References to the Merry Monarchs, however, were generally deferred in favour of Mo's Merrymakers. By all accounts the tour was successful in terms of audience numbers - this being likely as the reputations of the two principal members had reached the far north "long before their arrival" (Morning Bulletin 23 Sept. 1929, 3). Fred Parsons in A Man Called Mo records that the tour only covered North Queensland. Parson's also records that "Mo was unfavourably compared with George Wallace, who had once cut cane up there for a living" (27).24

After playing the major centres, with seasons quite a deal longer than any of Clay’s previous Queensland tours, the company returned to Sydney towards the end of the year, at which time Rene signed on for Frank Neil’s revue Clowns in Clover, in Melbourne. He collapsed on stage one night during this production and was rushed to hospital with peritonitis, the result being that he was kept off stage for some six months. The end of 1929 also saw the virtual collapse of Clay’s vaudeville company, with its headquarters leased out to Harry Kitching, and the Sydney circuit all but disbanded. Harry Clay's proud record of achievement in Queensland, which until now has gone unrecognised by theatre historians, will stand. It is likely that no vaudeville, nor possibly any other theatrical company before or after his, has been able to service the state on such a regular basis with such acclaim and popularity, and for such an unbroken period. As the Queensland Times of 12 July 1909 records - a statement typical of the comments published throughout the first eighteen years of tours at least:

Amongst the many entertainers that visit Ipswich none are more welcome than Clay's Waxworks and Company, who are unanimously regarded as the finest travellers' organisation of the kind yet seen... (4).

23 In the 31 July issue of Everyone's that year, Rene was reported to have told a court - as part of the divorce proceedings from his first wife - that he and Gale only "received £70 weekly on their present contract with Clay's." Rene also expressed the fear that when his contract finished with Clay's "there would be difficulty finding remunerative employment because of the talkies" (39).
24 A Man Called Mo is largely unreliable in its account of Rene's early years (including his Stiffy and Mo period) and hence any references should be treated with caution (see "What Oh Tonight" thesis for further details).
Plate 50
Nellie Kolle as the principle boy in Bluebeard (Fullers) 1922
(Courtesy of the Fryer Library)

Plate 51
Roy Rene 1915
(Theatre Apr. 1915, 35)