

EDWARD BRANSCOMBE

English-born singer Edward Branscombe undertook several world tours (including at least five visits to Australia) between 1896 and 1909 with such companies as the English Concert Party, Westminster Glee Concert Company and Scarlet Troubadours. In 1909 he began to establish a circuit of open-air garden theatres in Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, and Sydney. He also put together a number of elegantly costumed troupes under the generic title *The Dandies*, with each being differentiated by a colour – Orange, Green, Pink, Red, Violet, and Scarlet. Branscombe also founded the *Smart Set Entertainers* (1915), a troupe which specialised in musical scenes. Among performers to have appeared in one or more of Branscombe's troupes during their career were: Claude Dampier, Walter George, Maud Fane, Arthur Mack, Fred Monument, Harry Borrodale, George Edwards and Joe Brennan. Branscombe revived the Westminster Glee 'Singers' in the early 1920s, and was still associated with the company well into the 1930s.

Born George Salmon, Edward Branscombe showed an interest in music and theatricals from as a child, an interest which eventually led his father to insist on him changing his name (TT: June 1916, 20). Between 1886 and 1895 he was engaged as a solo tenor at Westminster Abbey, before undertaking his first tour of Australia in 1896 as a member of the English Concert Company. In 1901, following a tour of South Africa, Branscombe put together the Westminster Glee Party and toured throughout the Commonwealth, beginning with three tours of Canada. The company travelled through the Pacific Islands and Antipodes in 1903, performing a mixed repertoire of English part songs, glees, and madrigals. Subsequent tours included India, China, and Japan (ca. 1904), and a return Australian visit (1905). The Glee Party also reportedly undertook tours to countries including Hawaii, the Bahamas, the West Indies, British Guinea, Java, Sumatra, Pekin, Hangkow, the Malay States, Cuba, and Newfoundland. A number of these countries had previously never been visited by a concert company. The troupe initially comprised four boy sopranos, an adult male quartet, four adult soloists (including one woman), and a pianist. By 1905, the boy juvenile members of the company numbered seven and the male quartet was expanded to a double quartet. In addition to his role as soloist, Branscombe acted as music director, conductor, and arranger.



Theatre Aug. (1915), 26.

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After returning to England around 1906, Branscombe reorganised the Glee Party into an even larger ensemble, approximately 20-24 members, before eventually putting together a more secular style of entertainment that he toured first as the *Scarlet Mysteries* and later as the *Scarlet Troubadours* (the company was also briefly billed in Australia as *Edward Branscombe's Jesters*, ca. 1909). The company, which blended light opera, concert work, and vaudeville, remained together for five years and garnered much popularity in Australia and New Zealand. Branscombe also pioneered the use of open-air venues in Australia with his 1909 season at the Melbourne seaside suburb of St Kilda. Open-air (garden) theatres subsequently opened in Brisbane (Cremorne Theatre), Perth, Adelaide, and Sydney (Manly and Darlinghurst). The Brisbane and Darlinghurst venues were built by Branscombe, in 1911 and 1915 respectively. The Manly venue became known as *Eden Gardens*. The Darlinghurst venue (situated on Bayswater Road), known simply as the *Garden Theatre*, was initially managed by Branscombe's brother, F. W. Salmon (TT: Apr. 1916, 7).

By 1911, Branscombe had put together a number of troupes under the generic title *The Dandies*, the name reflecting the elegant style of costuming. Each troupe, comprising around a dozen performers and music director/pianist, was distinguished by a colour, hence the *Orange Dandies*, *Green Dandies*, *Pink Dandies*, *Red Dandies*, *Violet Dandies*, and *Scarlet Dandies*. By this time, too, Branscombe was arranging numerous musical pieces for publication, including instrumental numbers from well-known 'serious' composers and popular folk melodies, which he turned into songs in collaboration with various lyricists. The *Dandies* companies maintained a significant presence around Australia throughout the First World War and possibly beyond, employing more than

six performers at a time, in addition to advance reps and production staff (scenic artists, costume designers and makers, etc). Among the most recognisable performers from this era were Claude Dampier, Howard Hall (later with Jim Gerald Revue Company), Walter George and Georgie Martin, Maud Fane, Arthur Mack, Mona Thomas (later with Jim Gerald, Ike Delavale and Kate Howarde), Fred Monument, Miss Pop Batterbury, Percy Mackay, Harry Borrodale, George Edwards, Joe Brennan, and Ida Newton.

Branscombe had a particularly strong entrepreneurial association with Brisbane between 1911 and ca. 1915. After having erected and opened the Cremorne Gardens on the south bank of the Brisbane River in 1911, he became the driving force behind a consortium of local entrepreneurs who came together in 1912 to build and manage the Palace Gardens. Comprising Branscombe, John N. McCallum (then manager of the Cremorne), and Empire Theatre operators Ted Holland and Percy St John, Palace Gardens Ltd opened the venue in August under the management of Holland and St John. The following year Branscombe's own company (Edward Branscombe Ltd) bought the property's freehold (BC: 15 Apr. 1913, 7), retaining ownership of the venue and land through until at least 1917. While details regarding the sale are yet to be located, advertisements placed in the *Brisbane Courier* in 1915, 1916 and 1917 indicate that three attempts were made to sell auction the property. The eventual new owner of the land has been identified as Scott Crawford Stewart Mullin. [see Palace Gardens entry for further details] In September 1915, Branscombe also finally purchased the land on which the Cremorne stood (it was then owned by the Permanent Assets and Investments Co), but on 27 May 1916 he sold the entire venture to McCallum. Although Branscombe had removed himself from the Cremorne's day-to-day operations, an arrangement was struck between the two men, which allowed him to continue sending his companies to the theatre on a regular basis.

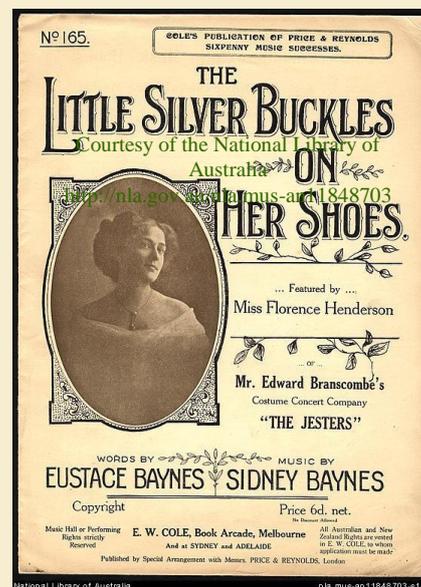
Around this same period, Branscombe put together another variety troupe, the Smart Set Entertainers. Styled as a "dainty, delightful, refined and mirth-provoking English costume comedy," the Smart Set appears to have focused much of its programme towards the musical scena genre. Among the troupe's more popular scenas were several exotic Asian pieces that featured songs and dance, artistic settings, and comedy, all based around a simple narrative. A number of Dandies performers are known to have moved across to the Smart Set, including Orange Dandies' members Walter George, Georgie Martin, and Harry de Robeck. In addition to his own touring companies, Branscombe also acted as agent and manager to a number of Australian and international acts (both in Australia and in South Africa), including Ada Crossley, American band master John Philip Souza, and the Cherniavskis. The troupe later became known as Walter George's Smart Set.

Branscombe revived the Westminster Glee Singers around late 1921 or early 1922, with the company's debut Australian season (Melbourne Town Hall, 4 June) following on from a "phenomenally successful" New Zealand tour (ctd. TT: June 1923, 15). The new repertoire expanded on the earlier format by including operatic selections, folk songs, and humorous quartets. Branscombe was still involved with the company in the early 1930s. The Australian tour, undertaken during early to mid-1930s, reportedly followed on from a successful tour of America and Canada (A: 7 Apr. 1930, 11). The *Brisbane Courier* obituary for Branscombe further records that the company, before arriving in Australia had performed more than 400 concerts in Canada alone (4 Dec. 1931, 19). One Australian performer to appear with the company at this time was the young Max Oldaker, who recalls that he also toured the Far East with Branscombe.

Although little is yet known of Branscombe's personal life, he was registered as living in Acton, England in 1900 with his wife, Mary. In addition to his published musical arrangements, he is known to have written articles for the *Australian Star News* and *Australian Theosophist* between 1926 and 1928, as well as acting as musical organiser for the Theos. He also addressed the Empire Club of Canada with a paper on the 'Influence of Music on the Community' in 1928. Branscombe and the Westminster Glee Singers also played themselves in a short 1927 British sound film called *Westminster Glee Singers*. He died in Durban, South Africa, in 1931.

SEE ALSO

- [Edward Branscombe's Dandies](#)
- [Cremorne Theatre](#)
- [Palace Theatre](#)

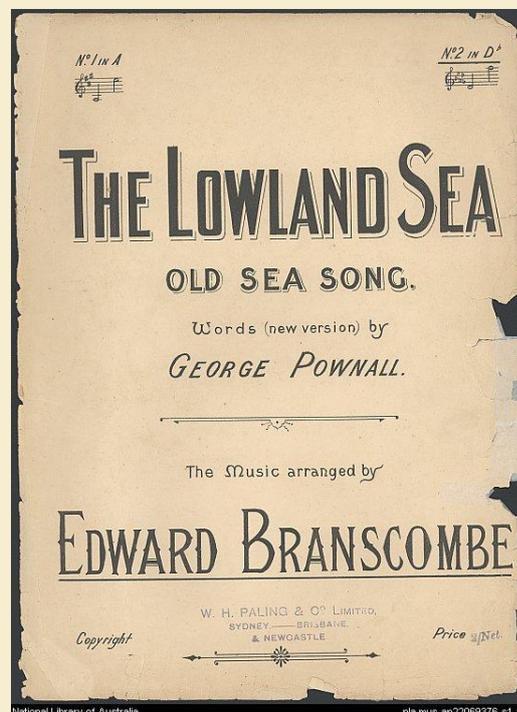


Source: National Library of Australia

SONG ARRANGEMENTS/ORCHESTRATIONS

The following list comprises published songs known to have been arranged by Edward Branscombe. See Library of Australia catalogue for further details.

- "Blackbirds and Thrushes." A Somersetshire folk song arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (ca. 1931).
- "Blue Danube Waltzes, The." (music by J. Strauss ; new words by George Pownall). Arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (ca. 1926).
- "Cycle of Nautical Songs, A." Arranged for S.A.T.B. with piano accompaniment (ca. 1926).
- "Cycle of Old English Ballads, A." Arranged for S.A.T.B. with piano accompaniment (1926).
- "Cycle of Old English Melodies, A." Arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (ca. 1931).
- "Cycle of Three American Airs, A." Arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (ca. 1926).
- "Cycle of Welsh Airs, A." Arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (192-).
- "Lass with Delicate Air, The." Arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B.B. (ca. 1926).
- "Londonderry Air, The." An old Irish folk tune arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (ca. 1931).
- "The Lowland Sea." An old sea song with new lyrics by George Pownall (ca. 190-).
- "Selection of Scottish Melodies," Arranged for unaccompanied mixed voices (1926).
- "Three Old Scottish Songs." Arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B. (ca. 1931).
- "Village Blacksmith, The." Music by W. H. Weiss; words by H. W. Longfellow; arranged for unaccompanied S.A.T.B.B. (ca. 1926).



Courtesy of the National Library of Australia

FURTHER REFERENCE

Branscombe, Edward. "Voice Production: The Imitation Aspect." TT: Aug. 1915, 26-27.

Djubal, Clay. "[Branscombe, Edward](#)." *AustLit* (2008).

"Edward Branscombe's Company." HM: 18 Dec. (1912), 3.

"Mr Edward Branscombe." [obituary] BC: 4 Dec. (1931), 19.

"Mr Branscombe's Concert Party." AA: 23 May (1903), 8.

Max Oldaker Papers (National Library of Australia) [Incl. correspondence from Branscombe (NLA MS 7970)].

National Library of Australia [holds programs and miscellaneous items relating to Edward Branscombe in its Ephemera collection (3526771 Ephemera)]

See also:

GR: Aug. (1923), 17 [Westminster Glee Singers photo]

JJ: 15 Sept. (1927), 24. [photo]

TT: Aug. (1916), 9 [re: 1903 Westminster Glee Party Australian souvenir program]

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