

GEORGE EDWARDS

Incl. **Rosie Parkes and Nell Stirling**

(1885-1953) Engaged as a dramatic actor by George Willoughby during his early career, George Edwards turned to the variety stage in 1914. Over the next decade and a half he established himself as one of Australia's leading sketch artists and monologists, most of this time spent in partnership with his first wife, Rosie Parkes. The couple worked for the Fullers, Harry Clay, Holland and St John, Dix-Baker, John N. McCallum and the Tivoli organisation among others, and in 1921 toured America, England and South Africa. They returned to Australia to play the Tivoli circuit, and a year or two later Edwards began presenting revusicals with his own company, George Edwards and Co. He continued to tour Australia and New Zealand through until the late 1920s, mostly on the Fullers and Tivoli circuits. As an actor Edwards had major roles in several high profile films, including *Satan in Sydney* (1918), *The Dingo* (1922) and *Townies and Hayseeds* (1923). He appeared regularly at the Sydney Tivoli during the 1940s. A stage partnership with actress Nell Sterling (aka Nell Malgram) led to the pair later marrying. Both were highly successful radio actors, starring in such serials as *Inspector Scott* and *Dad and Dave*. Edwards, by then known as the "man with a thousand voices," was also producing his own shows.

As an all-round performer George Edwards (not to be confused with the well-known English actor/manager George Edwardes) reached the top echelons of the entertainment industry as a variety performer, and stage, film and radio actor. From his early days in the variety industry he garnered praise from many critics who saw in him a fine example of a local artist who could invariably upstage any imported artist sharing the same programme. *Australian Variety* records in this respect that by the end of 1917 Edwards had "proved through his long Fullers engagement that given the opportunity Australians can make just as good [in their own county] as imported acts" (21 Dec. 1917, n. pag.). The *Theatre* magazine records two years later: "Is there a pair of sketch artists in Australia to-day the equal of George Edwards and Rosie Parkes - home-grown or imported? They're Australians themselves. Admirably worked is the offering in which they succeed in backing a 100-1 chance winner through the aid of a magic ring" (Nov. 1919, 28). Following the demise of variety in Australia Edwards turned to radio, becoming one of the most successful character voice performers during the 1940s and 1950s "golden era" of radio drama.

1896-1913

The eldest son of Lewis Arthur Parkes and Sarah Jane (nee Turbill), George Edwards was born Harold Parkes in the Adelaide suburb of St Peter's on 11 March 1886.¹ He attended North Norwood Public School until the age of eleven and then followed his father into the grocery business, starting out as an office boy with wholesale grocers and importers D. and J. Fowler and later with Wood, Son and Company (Lewis Parks eventually rose to the position of manager with Adelaide merchants Crawford and Company.) During his mid-teens, Edwards, then still known as Hal Parks, became a member of the Appendrena Dramatic Players, and it was with this club that he began performing comedy sketches with his younger brother Albert Lewis (Lew). His infatuation with the theatre from such a young age may well have been due to the discovery that performing in front of people helped relieve his stuttering. It was during this period, too, that he first began to develop his talent for mimicry. Known in his later life as the "Man with a Thousand Voices," Edwards' ability to mimic other people, according to one anecdote, saw him once adopt his father's voice in order to convince an angry neighbour to return a ball ("George Edwards," n. pag).

By the age of eighteen, Edwards had appeared in numerous amateur plays. A 1915 *Theatre Magazine* article indicates that he spent some time as an amateur thespian in Melbourne (Jan. 1915, 14) before travelling to the United Kingdom in 1904. He worked for some three years as a professional actor, with part of this time spent in London under the direction of British impresario George Edwardes and alongside such celebrities as Marie Studholme. He also toured the provinces and made appearances in music halls. His success as a variety performer (specialising in song and dance routines) eventually saw him embrace that area of the profession over serious theatre. It has also been reported that he worked for a period of time as a dance instructor ("George Edwards," n. pag).



In *Million Dollar Girl*
(Tivoli Theatre, Sydney)
Green Room Apr. (1918), 10.

¹ Some sources indicate that he was born in Kent Town, South Australia. Several sources, including Richard Lane (1994) also indicate that Edwards' birth surname was spelled Parks. While neither spelling has yet been confirmed, his first wife was known professionally as Rosie Parkes and his daughter as Chandra Parkes, which suggests that the name was spelled with an "e."

Edwards returned to Australia in 1907 after being offered a contract by J. C. Williamson's to appear in a season of musical comedy, the most notable production being *The Blue Moon*, in which he played Private Charlie Taylor. Other roles included Hoggenheimer in *The Girl from Kays* and Con Kidder in *The Red Mill*. On 6 August that same year, he married Margaret Rose Wilson of Melbourne. She would later become well known on the Australian and New Zealand variety stages as Edwards's sketch partner, Rosie Parkes. A journalist writing for the *Theatre* magazine in 1919 suggested that many playgoers would likely remember "the romantic marriage contracted by these two artistes [who] met a luncheon, became mutually infatuated during the first course, and held hands during the main course. By dessert, Edwards had proposed, and "a friendly cabman drove them to the registry office immediately" (Aug. 1919, 7).² Although the veracity of this story may be somewhat doubtful and little else is known of their early years together, it has been established that they had one child, a daughter named Chandra, who was born ca. 1910 (GR: Apr. 1920, 7).

Following the Williamson's engagement, Edwards toured with George Willoughby as the lead juvenile in a company that included Beatrice Day. His known roles were Mr Preedy in *Mr Preedy and the Countess*, Crosbie in *The Night of the Party*, and Ebenezer in *What Happened to Jones*. He later returned to variety theatre under contract to Hugh D. McIntosh (Harry Rickards' Tivoli Theatres Ltd), presenting a series of character studies on the Tivoli circuit. His feature act at this time is said to have been a 'Dago' sketch (TT: Jan. 1915, 14-15). It was during this engagement (ca. 1912/1913) that he caught the attention of Edward Branscombe, who had recently established a circuit of open-air theatres around Australia to house his refined English-style costume comedy companies known as The Dandies (each troupe was identified by a different colour). Branscombe offered Edwards a principal comedian role with the Pink Dandies and suggested that he change his name from Harold Parks to something that better suited the organisation's upmarket image. Parks chose to name himself George Edwards in deference to his celebrated former employer.

1914-1919

In reporting on the Pink Dandies season at the northern Sydney seaside suburb of Manly, the *Theatre's* vaudeville critic wrote of George Edwards' contribution to the programme:

[First half] Entry very good. Voice has no quality whatsoever. Almost a patter voice. Good actor. Gestures splendid. Every one of his movements has a meaning. Has sacrificed his voice to patter. If he had a better voice would be a sort of man diseuse. Clear enunciation of tongue tanglers. Encore item (sketch) very good. For his second encore, clever parody of Bret Harte's story... [Second half] In his make-up as Dago would not know him. Splendid. In his second number his business in turning round at end of each verse very good. Second encore clever item - dancing. Other character imitations not so successful. In all of them little bit of Dago (Jan. 1915, 14-15).

After Edwards left Branscombe's organisation sometime in early 1915, he decided to put together an act with his wife, perhaps due to the need to keep his family with him during the constant touring required of a variety artist. Although Rosie Parkes had never previously worked on the professional stage, the pair quickly formed an on-stage rapport, establishing a popular reputation through engagements with such leading entrepreneurs as Dix-Baker (Newcastle/Hunter Valley, NSW) and Holland and St John (Empire Theatre, Bris). Presenting a sketch and singing



Rosie Parkes
Green Room Apr. (1918), 10.

act, with both performers contributing to the writing of the material, they soon caught the attention of the Fullers' Theatres management and were offered a contract to tour the company's Australia and New Zealand circuits. Prior to joining the Fullers, however, Edwards accepted a brief engagement with Philip Lytton to play the role of Rube in the Palace Theatre (Sydney) season of *The Waybacks*.

Australian Variety records in 1916 that Edwards had secured the performing rights from C. J. Dennis to perform ten of the poet's 'Ginger Mick' poems, a move that played an important part in establishing his reputation on both sides of the serious/popular theatre divide. Advertising for his season at the Adelphi Theatre (Syd) in mid-July that year records, for example, that he was "featuring *The Sentimental Bloke's* verses" (SMH: 1 July 1916, 2). He and Parkes also undertook a successful season at the Empire Theatre around the middle of 1916 for the Fullers, who had recently begun managing the theatre following the deaths of Ted Holland (1914) and Percy St John (1915). In the same article, it is reported that while Edwards and Parkes had been on the Fullers' circuit for almost a year by that stage, governing director Ben Fuller had not yet managed to see them. The night he finally caught their act, Fuller signed them for another year on the spot (5 July 1916, 12).

² See also GR: Apr. 1920, 7, which refers to Edwards and Parkes as Mr and Mrs Harold Parks.

Following the conclusion of their Fullers' engagement in August 1917, Edwards and Parkes accepted an offer from John N. McCallum to join his newly formed Courtiers Costume Comedy Company at the Cremorne Theatre. Their contract lasted until around November. Some particularly popular items presented by the pair included Edwards's monologue in which he described the life of a leper and his release (BC: 18 Aug. 1917, 15) and a "dago" song and dance turn (2-8 Nov.), along with the sketches "The Ragtime Jockey" (16-22 Nov.) and "The Dinkum School" (23-29 Nov.). They also occasionally appeared in musical farces. One such production was *Fun in a Music Shop* (2-8 Nov.).

In December 1917, Edwards and Parkes moved temporarily to Ocean Grove, Bonnie Vale in Victoria, reportedly so that Edwards could take over the management of one of his father-in-law's large estates (ctd. AV: 21 December 1917, p.17). They did not stay long, however, as Edwards was enticed by Sydney-based vaudeville manager Harry Clay to write and direct a show for the 1917/18 holiday season. That production, *Toyland*, premiered at the Bridge Theatre, Newtown, in December and played all over Clay's circuit, which at that stage also included the major towns on the South-West NSW rail line, stretching from Katoomba down to Wagga Wagga and Albury. Clay then contracted Edwards to write and stage a number of revusicals on the circuit during the early months of 1918. Among his known productions were *Mixed Goods*, *Nosey Parker Nose*, *The Cave Dwellers*, and *Grubb's Night Out*.

Edwards and Parkes were by this time very much in demand within the variety industry. Indeed, they graced the front cover of *Australian Variety* on several occasions during the period. For its Christmas 1917 edition, the magazine went so far as to say that "we could not have selected a more consistently successful Australian act to have had the honour of adorning our big Xmas issue if we had tried for a month of Sundays... Edwards is a clever performer... one of the finest elocutionists the Australian stage has given us" (21 Dec. 1917, 17). The "Ginger Mick" recitals were given particular praise by the magazine's critic.

Edwards and Parkes secured engagements with a number of leading organisations during the remainder of 1918. One of Edwards' more sensational roles that year, however, was as Will Wayburn in Beaumont Smith's film *Satan in Sydney*. The controversial subject matter and perceived lack of morality drew much criticism from critics and the church but, not surprisingly, also drew good audiences to its screenings, helping cement Edwards's national profile. Their most notable stage appearances that year, however, were as principals in several musical comedies, follies, and revues produced by both Hugh D. McIntosh's Tivoli organisation and J. C. Williamson's Ltd. For the Tivoli, they were cast in the revue *The Million Dollar Girl* (Sydney), while Edwards scored the role of film producer Keith McDonald in the Williamson's production of the Montague Glass musical comedy *Business Before Pleasure* (Theatre Royal, Melbourne). The latter company also included veteran actress Maggie Moore.

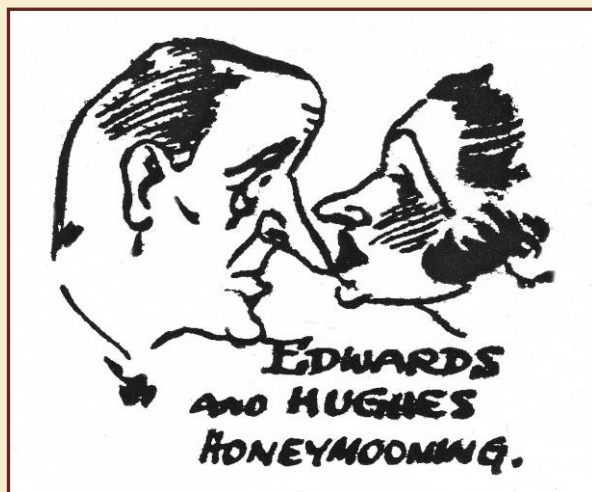
Edwards and Parkes consolidated their reputations around Australia throughout 1919, when J.C. Williamson's "Business Before Pleasure" company toured the firm's extensive national circuit. Returning to vaudeville towards the end of the year, they continued touring. Their eight-week season at the Majestic Theatre, Adelaide, was claimed by *Australian Variety* to be the longest run by a single act at that theatre (23 Oct. 1919, 12). In late 1919, the pair played another Brisbane season at Brisbane's Empire Theatre, appearing in the first-part vaudeville programme of a bill headlined by the Al Bruce Revue Company. The *Brisbane Courier* critic wrote that they performed one sketch, "Charmed," in a "thoroughly natural way, though the situations are ludicrous" (8 Dec. 1919, 8). They drew further praise in the next week's review for their "delightfully amusing... 'Off for their Holidays'" (15 Dec. 1919, 9).

1920-1929

The Empire Theatre season lasted into January 1920. Upon his return to Sydney, Edwards went into rehearsal at the Alhambra Theatre, directing two new works for the theatre's lessee/producer/manager C. F. Pugliese. The first production, Edwards's own reworking of John F. Sheridan's *The New Barmaid*, saw him take on the lead role of Bert White. His co-stars included Jack Kearns, Ruby Esdaile (the new barmaid), and Vera Walton (the outgoing barmaid). Two weeks later, he presented his own original musical comedy, *The Gumleaf Girls*. Set in several popular local resorts, the story concerns the Doolittle family of Gumleaf selection, Emu Flat, who have journeyed to Sydney. The romantic angle surrounds the two sons and Billie Bong and Meadow Fields, two 'gumleaf girls' they meet on the holiday. Directed by Edwards, the cast included Tom Haverley and Alice and Vera Walton.

Sometime around March/April 1920, Edwards and Parkes travelled overseas, accompanied by their daughter Chandra (ctd. GR: Apr. 1920, 7). Following a short tour of New Zealand for the Fullers, they played engagements in New York, where it is said they were earning around £100 a week. The American tour was not a long one, however, due, according to Edwards, to bitterness directed towards British artists by the American agencies (GR: May 1921, 15). Edwards and Parkes spent the remainder of 1920 and much of 1921 in England, playing seasons in London and touring the English provinces. They returned to Australia via South Africa (which included a brief engagement) in April 1922. Following a season in Brisbane with Harry Borrodale's Sparklers (ca. April-May), the couple accepted a contract with Harry G. Musgrove to appear on his Tivoli circuit.

Shortly after he arrived back in Australia, Edwards appeared in *The Dingo*, a motion picture produced by British-Australasian Photoplays. The following year, he played the role of Pa Townie in the Beaumont Smith film *Townies and Hayseeds*. During the remainder of the 1920s, however, he largely continued to work the variety stage, although by 1923, this was without Parkes. While no information has yet surfaced on why the couple no longer performed together, Edwards' marriage with variety performer Molly Hughes in 1925 suggests that he and Parkes may have separated shortly after their arrival back in Australia. Their last known whereabouts together is in July 1922, while performing at the Melbourne Tivoli. Following their divorce, Edwards married Molly Hughes in Sydney. Other than her name little else is currently known about Hughes or her brief time with Edwards, other than that they also worked an act together. The 5 January edition of the *Age* in 1925 records, for example, that humour was provided at the Bijou Theatre (Melb) by George Edwards and Molly Hughes in their laughable sketch entitled "An Indian Night."



Smith's Weekly 3 Jan. (1925), n. pag.

Sometime either in 1923 or 1924, Edwards began touring his own variety company on Fullers' circuit. Billed as George Edwards and Co, the troupe presented comedy sketches and variety acts as a first-half vaudeville entertainment. Popular skits, as performed by Edwards and Hughes at Melbourne's Bijou Theatre over the summer of 1924 - 1925, included "Off on their Holidays" (20 Dec. 1924) and "An Indian Night" (3 Jan. 1925). Among the other members of the troupe were well-known ventriloquist Carlton Max and actress Elsie Sylvaney (aka Elsie May Wilcox), who later married filmmaker Charles Chauvel. Little information regarding Edwards's movements within the vaudeville industry after 1925 has been uncovered to date. He toured briefly on the Fuller's circuit with Robert Roberts' Bon-bon Revue Company [*see for example, Bijou Theatre, Melbourne, ca. Sept. 1927*] and appeared regularly on the Tivoli circuit during the late 1920s. He was also engaged as a feature entertainer on the Sydney Show Boat during the latter years of the decade. This period of his career, however, was effectively a low point, due not only to the decreasing engagement opportunities available to variety performers but also as a result of his second wife's untimely (and accidental) death.



George and Nell Stirling (Mrs George Edwards) on board the "Aorangi"

27 Apr. 1938 (for 2UW)
Source: State Library of NSW

Around 1928-1929, Edwards began to work on stage with young actress Nell Stirling (aka Helen Dorothy Malmgron), who was the daughter of New Zealand-born stockbroker Henry James Malmgron (and associated with Tivoli Theatre's general manager Jack Musgrove). According to Coral Lansbury, Edwards also attempted to operate a theatrical agency in association with his brother, but eventually moved into radio through the encouragement of Lew (Lansbury, 416). It was to be a career transition that eventually saw Edwards become not only an Australian radio star but also a radio pioneer.

Billy Moloney recalls the start of the Edwards and Stirling partnership in his book, *Memoirs of an Abominable Showman*:

I was only a minor light myself, but can at least claim credit for starting one of the greatest Australian radio teams on the road to fame. Away back in the days of the old Tivoli in Sydney we had a fairly regular act presented by George Edwards, who usually teamed up with an attractive young actress in the presentation of one-act plays of about fifteen minutes duration which fitted into the usual variety programme. George lost a succession of partners through death and misfortune, and like all other artists fell on evil days when the talkies

started to boom. He couldn't find a partner and couldn't find a job. The Tivoli General Manager, Jack Musgrove, had a soft spot for Edwards, and in my capacity as booking manager of the theatre, I was often reminded to see if I could find the partner and the job for the actor. Neither of us had much luck until I thought of a young girl, the daughter of Musgrove's stock-broker who had been trying to get on the stage in one - any one - of J.C.W. Ltd's several theatres in the city. "How about Nell Malgram?" [sic] I asked Musgrove.... "Great idea!" [he said]. "See what George Edwards thinks of it." George was delighted. Nell joined him in one act vaudeville playlets. Then they tried their luck putting on a radio show in a Sydney suburban store, the Hub, Newtown, and made a big hit. If his plays could be a hit on stage, why not in regular radio series? George and Nell who changed her name to Sterling, progressed from triumph to triumph and George developed his ability to present a dozen different voices (138-9). [see *Historical Notes and Corrections 2.5 for responses to Maloney's recall*]

1930 -1953

Edwards began presenting radio comedy sketches for the Australian Broadcasting Company in 1931. Among his earliest shows were those featuring the ABC Light Opera Company. Broadcast on Saturday nights between October and December 1931, Edwards performed his sketches opposite a number of other performers, including his daughter Chandra and Nell Stirling. All three were involved in Edwards's breakthrough radio play, *The Ghost Train*, which was offered to him by Sydney radio station 2UE in 1932. Edwards not only produced it, but also took on multiple characters in a live-to-air radio broadcast. His decision to play the additional roles is said to have been forced on him because the budget of only 70 pounds was not enough to procure the twelve necessary actors (ctd. Rutledge, n. pag.). Believing that the public would see his involvement as merely a stunt to save money, Edwards is said to have initially resisted the suggestion he play the multiple roles, but these reservations were put to rest when he garnered much positive audience feedback following the broadcast. *The Ghost Train* also marked the beginning of Edwards's pivotal relationship with scriptwriter Maurice Francis.

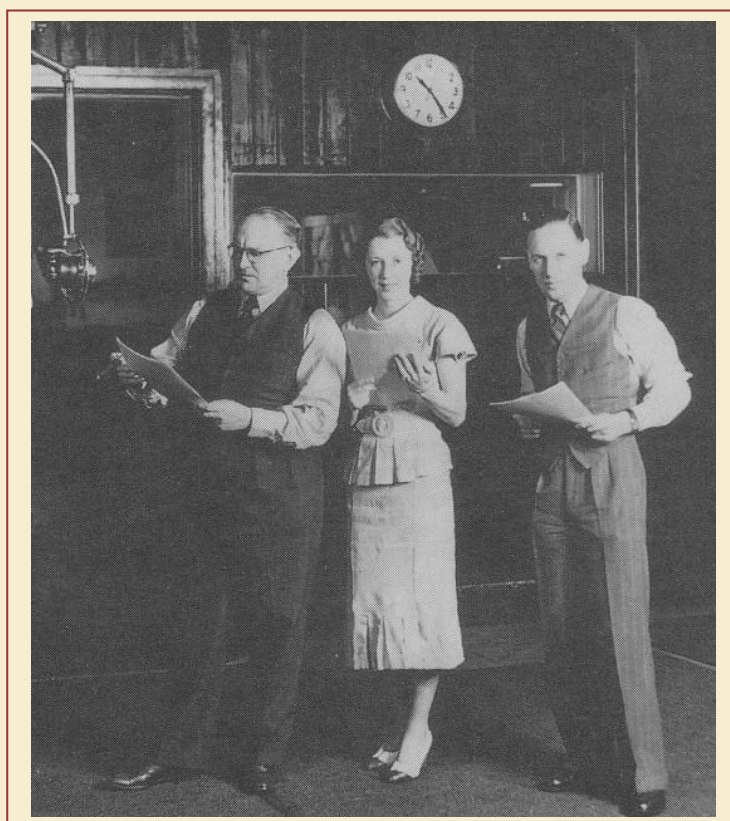


In 1933, Edwards formed the George Edwards Players, and the following year moved from 2UE to radio station 2GB. During his time with 2GB, Edwards and his team of actors and writers were responsible for up to twenty-four live productions a week, including such shows as *Darby and Joan* (morning programme hosted by Edwards and Stirling), *David and Dawn* (a children's show also hosted by Edwards and Stirling), and serial dramas such as *Westward Ho*, *Inspector Scott*, *The Laughing Cavalier* and *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1940). In these, Edwards would typically take on up to six characters at a time (and often in the same scene). Edwards and Stirling become husband and wife in 1934, with their marriage celebrated at St David's Presbyterian Church in Haberfield, Sydney, on 29 March. Around the same time he also signed a recording contract with EMI Columbia, which led to a number of record releases. In 1936, Edwards moved to 2UW, remaining with that radio station until his death in 1953. It was with 2UW that he produced arguably his most popular radio series, *Dad and Dave of Snake Gully* (first broadcast in May 1937). In the series, Edwards played Dad (along with several other characters), with Stirling taking on the part of Mabel.

Source: www.radioarchives.com

Edwards' popularity with the Australian public saw him continue producing his own shows throughout the 1940s, although he gradually reduced his involvement as an actor. By the late 1940s, he was appearing only in *Dad and Dave* episodes. Through his George Edwards Players, he provided employment opportunities for many local actors, including a young John Meillon. Among the more prominent writers to be associated with him were Maurice Francis, Lorna Bingham, Sumner Locke Elliot and Eric Scott. However, according to Martha Rutledge, Edwards and Stirling were known to their actors as "Scrooge Edwards" and "Nell Pound Stirling," due to the low wages they paid. In contrast, Edwards and Stirling became members of the upper Sydney social circle. By the late 1930s, they had purchased a house in the exclusive suburb of Point Piper, and while Edwards satiated his love of horseracing by establishing his own stable, Stirling opened her own nightclub. An excellent golfer, who played off a handicap of four, Edwards also indulged in another passion, rifle shooting (SMH: 29 Aug. 1953, 4). The couple had one child, a daughter named Caroline, who was born in 1941. By the mid-1940s, however, Edwards' and Stirling's extra-curricular ventures were struggling, a situation that led to Edwards drinking more heavily and eventually to a separation.

Following their divorce in 1948, Stirling married Alexander George Atwill, an accountant she had earlier brought in to help manage her aging father's business. Together, she and Atwill bought out Edwards, effectively making Stirling her ex-husband's employer. This situation lasted only a few years, as Stirling died in 1951 after accidentally overdosing on carbital capsules. She left behind her husband and their only child (also a daughter). In February 1953, then aged 67, he married 23-year-old actress Coral Lansbury (later the mother of Liberal politician and businessman, Malcolm Turnbull). Edwards' last radio series was *Ralph Rashleigh*, broadcast that same year. He died in the Sydney suburb of Petersham on 28 August 1953, barely six months after his marriage.



George Edwards, Nell Stirling and writer Maurice Francis (ca. late 1930s)

Source: Richard Lane. *The Golden Age of Australian Radio Drama* (1994), 32.



Source: *Australian Old Time Radio*

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

1918: **Mixed Goods** [revusical] • **Toyland** [pantomime] • **Nosey Parker Nose** [revusical]

1919: **The Cave Dwellers** [revusical] • **Grubb's Night Out** [revusical]

1920: **The New Barmaid** [musical comedy] • **The Gumleaf Girls; Or, Hello Mars** [musical comedy]

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. **George Edwards: The Variety Performer and Stage Actor:** Regarded as one of Australia's leading vaudeville sketch actors during the late 1910s and throughout the 1920s, Edwards initially established his reputation doing character sketches (or studies). One of his early specialties was the "dago." Between 1915 and ca. 1922, his act invariably involved Rosie Parkes, and although reviews from that period provide little insight into their on-stage dynamics and performance styles, it appears that they specialised in comedic social sketches of around 15-20 minutes duration. These often included one or several musical numbers. Much of their material, including songs, is believed to have been written or adapted by the pair to suit their own particular style of delivery. Some critical reviews from that period include:

- Those every item [on the Courtier's programme] had a distinct attractiveness, the one which probably was most popular was a one act farce enacted by Miss Rosie Parkes, Mr George Edwards and Mr Harry Borrodale, which created great merriment... [Edwards later described] the life of a leper and his release, and this was greeted with rounds of applause (BC: 18 Aug. 1917, 15).
- *Nosey Parker Nose*, written by George Edwards proved to be one of the finest and biggest laugh getters seen at this theatre [Bridge Theatre, Newtown, Sydney] for some time. It gave ample opportunity for all artists and each took every advantage and made a success of their parts (AV: 1 Mar. 1918, n. pag.).
- George Edwards and Rosie Parkes finished a highly successful eight weeks' season at the Majestic [Adelaide] last week. This is probably the longest run an act has yet done at this theatre (AV: 23 Oct. 1919, n. pag.).
- Special interest will attach to the appearance at Fullers' Empire Theatre this week of Edwards and Parkes, the two popular Australian sketch artistes, who have just returned from a highly successful American and South African tour. It is doubtful if there is a better elocutionist on the Australian stage today than Mr Edwards in pieces of the robust-type... for who that has heard Mr Edwards recite "Dangerous Dan McGrew" does not remember it with pleasure? In light or "dude" comedy roles he is equally successful and is well supported by his charming and accomplished wife, Miss Rosie Parkes (BC: 17 Sept. 1921, 13).
- Edwards and Parkes caused merriment by their little war, and those who applauded "her" version of "him" were equally delighted to hear "his" version of "her." The verdict on points seemed to be a draw (BC: 3 Oct. 1921, 4).
- Edwards and Parkes filled in half an hour with bright "patter" and witty repartee (BC: 10 Oct. 1921, 8).

It appears that towards the end of their partnership, Edwards and Parkes attempted to move beyond the familiar vaudeville comedy routines and experimented with material that probed a little deeper into social mores and human behaviour. One such sketch, "Honeymoon Confessions," presented at the Tivoli Theatre, Sydney, during May 1922, drew the ire of one *Theatre* magazine critic. Under the caption "Misapplied Ability" the review records, "Those fine sketch artists, Rosie Parkes and George Edwards appear in what is, for professionals of their standing, a very ugly interlude. Better work than these two have done has not been seen on the Australian stage. Therefore the greater the pity it is to find them lowering their flag. Miss Parke's voice is remindful of the voices of Tien Hogue and Beryl Bryant. 'Tis a joy to listen to it. Mr Edwards's experienced craft adorns all that he touches. But it will soon be craft of another - and infinitely baser - meaning if he surrounds himself and his intellectual stage-partner with the atmosphere of grossness sensed in 'Honeymoon Confessions'" (June 1922, 17).

It is unclear if this sketch is the same one staged by Edwards and Parkes in January 1920 (identified only as 'Confessions') and which the *Brisbane Courier* vaudeville critic described as "delightful" (5 Jan. 1920, n. pag.).

2. Misconceptions Regarding George Edward's Pre-1930s Career: Until the 2005 publication "What Oh Tonight" (Clay Djubal, Ph D Diss) every historical insight into Edwards career has either dismissed his pre-radio period as "unsuccessful" or has presented only snippets of his vaudeville and/or dramatic stage career, and subsequently failed to recognise his considerable reputation as a variety entertainer. There are several reasons for these inaccuracies and oversights, and they essentially follow a similar course to that outlined with regard to Nat Phillips career (as argued Chapter Six of "What Oh Tonight."). The trail of errors regarding George Edwards career as a variety entertainer include the following:

2.1. The claims regarding Edwards's "unsuccessful" pre-radio career appear to originate with a *Bulletin* article written by Sumner Locke Elliott in 1980. Although Locke Elliot, who was first engaged by Edwards as a thirteen-year-old in 1934, provides a significant insight into Edwards's radio performances and relationship with Nell Stirling, there are a number of historical and chronological errors in the piece.³ Not only has his recall of events that took place between 32 to 46 years remained unchallenged until 2005 but the structure of his article also invites concern. Edwards' career between 1913 and ca. 1929 is collapsed into one sentence (which also contains errors regarding his stage name and performance specialty), while his late 1920s career (undertaken at a time when virtually the entire Australian variety industry was near the point of collapse) is given extended coverage. In this section, Edwards (described as a 'sad fat little man with looks gone into jowls and thinning sandy grey hair') is presented as a failed vaudevillian who was one step away from rock bottom, rather than as a performer whose career was then typical of most in the Australian variety industry during the lead up to the Depression.

³ Parts of Locke Elliot's article should be treated with the same degree of caution required when reading Fred Parson's *A Man Called Mo*. In Parson's case all the information he presents regarding Rene's Stiffy and Mo years (1916-1928) is second hand – he even admits he never met Rene until 1936 (see page). A similar situation arises with Locke Elliot. Although he was associated with Edwards, it was only from 1934 (when he was fifteen), thus making his account similarly second hand and doubtful. The fact that Parsons and Locke Elliot have been given so much credit by later historians is indicative of a major flaw in the recounting of Australian popular culture history – the over-reliance on memoir and secondary sources and a lack of sustained primary source research.

Although Locke Elliott clearly undertook no research into Edwards' pre-radio career, his (irrelevant) twelve years' association with George Edwards Productions between 1934 and 1946) has allowed his version of events to become the accepted account. Edwards's non-inclusion in major reference sources devoted to Australian theatre, such as the *Companion to Theatre in Australia* and *Entertaining Australia*, publications in which his name should have by rights appeared, have also contributed to the myth, because a lack of inclusion implies a career that lacked success. A similar situation has also occurred with the pre-1930s Australian variety industry in general [see *Clay Djubal, What Oh Tonight, Chapter One*].

2.2. References to Edwards's supposedly "failed" career published after 1980 include:

- (i) "Hal became an acrobatic dancer and patter artist in vaudeville and costume farce. He toured Australia, New Zealand, the United States of America and, during World War I, South Africa but never achieved major success" (Lansbury, 416).

Response : The South African tour, as with the USA, was undertaken in the early 1920s and not during World War I [see *Chronology below*]. Edwards was also best known throughout his career as a vaudeville sketch actor. Like most other Australian variety theatre performers, he was forced to be versatile in order to continue working, and in this respect he could be called on to sing, dance, present comedy and patter routines, and do whatever else may have been required of him. No reviews or advertised engagement billings, however, have identified him as being an acrobatic dancer (a highly skilled specialty act).

44 years younger than her husband, Coral Lansbury (1929-1991), the author of George Edwards' entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, was born shortly before he began to establish himself as a radio actor/producer, and hence had no recollection and very little knowledge of his earlier career as a variety entertainer. The ABD entry, which has arguably been the most significant historical insight into Edwards since 1981, has never been investigated by historians to date, and still remains a major (online) source today. The fact that none of the entry's sources are dated prior to 1931 further undermines its historical relevance.

- (ii) "Calling herself Nell Stirling, she was engaged by Harold Parks (an unsuccessful actor known as George Edwards) as his assistant in variety acts" (Rutledge, 311).

Response: Stirling was Edwards's stage partner (as in Edwards and Stirling) in sketches not an assistant. The above biography clearly demonstrates the absurdity of this statement.

- (iii) "The years went by without many memorable moments. [Edwards] worked without particular distinction in practically every branch of theatre - comedy and drama, musical comedy and vaudeville, and he learned to dance. But there were no high points.... When a 13 year-old Neva Carr Glynn gained her first professional engagement - in the chorus line of a pantomime for Fullers, at the Majestic Theatre, Newtown, in 1924 - George Edwards was in the company; but he still hadn't made star billing. In 1931 he considered his position and the future looked bleak" (Lane, 31).

Response: Another work of fiction. As the biography presented above demonstrates, George Edwards and Rosie Parkes were regarded as feature acts on both the Fullers and Tivoli circuits from at least as early as 1916. Their photographs even appeared on the front cover of *Australian Variety* on at least two occasions: 5 July 1916 (with the caption 'Re-engaged [by the Fullers] for another 12 months') and the prestigious end-of-year issue for 21 December 1917. Their record-breaking eight-week season at the Fullers Majestic Theatre in Adelaide in 1919 is further indication that the act was still considered a major drawcard. In the *Australian Variety* issue of 23 October 1919, which publicises Edwards's *Mixed Goods* revusical on the front cover as well as providing a review of the Adelaide season (12), also records: "Edwards and Parkes vie with the best for headline honours. Here is an act that is to be commended for its originality and ability. Miss Parkes, one of the best-lookers in vaudeville, is also a highly capable actress and is an excellent feeder to hubby George (without doubt one of Australia's most versatile performers)" (9). Other published reviews and articles demonstrating their industry status include 'Music and Drama,' BC: 17 Sept. 1921, 13 and GR: June 1922, 22.

3. Although little is yet known of Edwards' brother Lew Parks, a 1919 *Australian Variety and Show World* article suggests that he was well known both in the theatrical industry and by the general public. The article records that "It is gratifying to note the success of [Edwards and Parkes], as George Edwards is a native of [Adelaide], being born in a suburb called St Peters (near where the 'big oranges grow,' and where other celebrities like Lew Parks, Beaumont Smith and the writer! first saw light)" (23 Oct. 1919, n. pag.).

4. Several issues within Billy Moloney's account of Edwards's career require clarifications. These are:
- (i) The reference to Jack Musgrove indicates that Edwards and Stirling must have begun their partnership no later than 1929. According to Frank van Straten, Musgrove remained with the Tivoli circuit after his cousin Harry G. Musgrove went bankrupt and was subsequently forced to sell his interests in the organisation to J. C. Williamson's Ltd. Jack Musgrove was persuaded by Williamson's chairman George Tallis to take over as general manager of the firm's newly formed theatrical arm, J. C. Williamson's Vaudeville Pty Ltd (which traded as Tivoli Celebrity Vaudeville). He remained with the company until it was forced to close down its vaudeville operations in 1929.
 - (ii) Moloney's statement that the Hub in Newtown was a store is erroneous. Previously known as the Bridge Theatre, it was built by Harry Clay in 1913 and used exclusively as either a live theatre or cinema up until the 1980s. Maloney has, as have several other people, confused the Hub (aka Hub No 2 - previously the Bridge Theatre) with another Hub Theatre (No 1) located at 222 King Street, Newtown (later known as Burland Hall).
 - (iii) The claim that Edwards lost a succession of vaudeville partners is misleading, because it should refer only to his two principal partners - Rosie Parkes (divorced) and Molly Hughes (died). All other on-stage partners (ca. 1927-1930) would have very likely been temporary associations anyway.
5. All of Edwards's early radio shows were broadcast live. In later years (ca. 1937 onwards), the serials were pre-recorded by Columbia Records and sold to radio networks throughout Australia and New Zealand.

SEE ALSO

- [Chandra Parkes](#)

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY (1914-1927)

All dates between October 1915 and 1922 relate to George Edwards and Rosie Parkes unless otherwise noted.

An asterisk (*) beside a date indicates that it is either approximate or has yet to be established.

- 1914:** EDWARD BRANSCOMBE'S PINK DANDIES (Eden Gardens, Manly; ca. Nov - 31 Dec.*)
- 1915:** EDWARD BRANSCOMBE'S PINK DANDIES (Eden Gardens, Manly; ca. Jan.*) ► PHILLIP LYTTON'S WAYBACKS Co (Palace Th, Syd; 2 Oct. -* > Edwards only) ► HOLLAND & ST JOHN (Empire Th, Bris; ca. Oct-Nov.*)
- NB:** Edwards and Parkes undertook an engagement with Dix-Baker (Newcastle and Hunter Valley, NSW) sometime between February and September 1915.
- 1916:** HOLLAND & ST JOHN Empire Th, Bris; ca. July-Aug.*) FULLERS THEATRES (New Adelphi Th, Syd; 1 July -*)
- 1917:** JOHN McCALLUM'S COURTIERS (Cremorne Th, Bris; ca. 4 Aug. - Dec.*) ► HARRY CLAY (Bridge Th, Newtown; ca. Dec.*)
- 1918:** HARRY CLAY (Sydney suburban circuit; ca. Jan-Feb.*) ► TIVOLI THEATRES LTD (Tivoli Th, Syd; ca. Apr.* > *Million Dollar Girl*) ► J. C. WILLIAMSON'S (Criterion Th, Syd; 24 Aug. -* > *Business Before Pleasure Co*) • Th Royal, Melb; 5 Oct. -*; > *Business Before Pleasure Co*)
- 1919:** FULLERS THEATRES (Majestic Th, Adel; ca. Aug-Oct.*) • (Empire Th, Bris; 6-31 Dec.)
- 1920:** FULLERS THEATRES (Empire Th, Bris; ca. Jan.*) ► C. F. PUGLIESE (Alhambra Th, Syd; (7 Feb. -* > *The New Barmaid*) ► New Zealand tour (possibly for Fullers Theatres > ctd. GR: Apr. 1920, 7)
- NB:** Edwards and Parkes left New Zealand for America in July 1920 (ctd. GR: Apr. 1920, p.7) and later travelled to the United Kingdom and South Africa. They returned to Australia in April 1921, and are believed to have played a brief season together.
- 1921:** HARRY BORRODALE'S SPARKLERS (Elite Th, Bris; ca. 23 Apr. -*) • FULLERS THEATRES (Bijou Th, Melb; ca. 3 Sept -*) • Empire Th, Bris; 17 Sept. - ca. Oct.*) • (Fullers' New Th; Syd; ca. 23-31 Dec.)
- 1922:** FULLERS THEATRES (Fullers' New Th, Syd; ca. Jan.*) ► TIVOLI THEATRES LTD (Tivoli Th, Syd; ca. May-June*) • (Tivoli Th, Melb; ca. July-Aug.*).
- 1924:** FULLERS THEATRES (Fullers' Th, Syd; ca. 18 Oct. -* > George Edwards and Co) • (Bijou Th, Melb; ca. 6-31 Dec. > George Edwards and Co)
- 1925:** FULLERS THEATRES (Bijou Th, Melb; ca. Jan.)
- 1927:** FULLERS THEATRES (Bijou Th, Melb; ca. 17 Sept. -* > Robert Roberts Bon-Bon Co).

ARCHIVES AND ON-LINE RESOURCES

[Australian Old Time Radio Shows](#). [This website contains an incomplete, but nevertheless extensive, listing of Edwards's radio productions from 1931 to 1953, including his roles as an actor]
[Australian Screen. "Dad and Dave from Snake Gully, Episode 1"](#) [Incl. Audio file, Curator's Notes, Clip Description and Principal Credits]
[Calloway Centre Archive, The University of Western Australia](#). See below for sound recording holdings.
[Library of Congress](#). See below for sound recording holdings.

Several of George Edwards's radio series can also accessed via the internet courtesy of various commercial or government-sponsored websites. Several sites also offer free mp3 downloads. Series with complete episodes available online include:

<u>Adventures of Marco Polo, The</u> (1940)	<i>Radio Archives</i> [sighted 24/02/2011]
<u>Afloat with Henry Morgan</u> (1947)	<i>Times Past Old Time Radio Archives</i> [sighted 24/02/2011]
<u>Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde</u> (1943)	<i>Times Past Old Time Radio Archives</i> [sighted 24/02/2011]
<u>Frankenstein</u> (1938)	<i>Botar's Old Time Radio</i> [sighted 24/02/2011]
<u>Man in the Iron Mask</u> (1948)	<i>Times Past Old Time Radio Archives</i> [sighted 24/02/2011]
<u>Son of Porthos</u> (1950)	<i>Times Past Old Time Radio Archives</i> [sighted 24/02/2011]

RECORDINGS

The following recordings are available commercially and/or through various Australian libraries]. All dates indicate first year of broadcast only.

Compilations (compact disks):

Stars of the Australian Stage and Radio: Volume 1. Larrikin, CD, LRH 429. [Series: Warren Faye Presents Yesterday's Australia] ("Snake Gully Home of Mine").
Stars of the Australian Stage and Radio: Volume 2. Larrikin, CD, LRH 430. [Series: Warren Faye Presents Yesterday's Australia] ("Gorblimey").

Original Radio Recordings (vinyl):

- [Callaway Centre Archive, The University of Western Australia](#):
 - Allan Armadale* (1949) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Bleak House* (1944) Episodes 3 and 4.
 - Courtship and Marriage* (1947) Episodes 873 and 874.
 - Dad and Dave from Snake Gully* (1937) Episodes 7, 8, 1022, 1023, 1330, 1331, 1332, 1333.
 - Flower of Darkness, The* (n. yr.) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Keys on the Case* (1952) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - January's Daughter* (n. yr.) Episodes 3 and 4.
 - Jezebel's Daughter* (1941) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Lady, The* (1943) Episodes 37 and 38.
 - Man in the Dark* (1943) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Martin's Corner* (n. yr.) Series 3, episodes 7, 8, 113, 114, 153, 154.
 - Pace that Kills, The* (1946) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Racing Harcourts, The* (1945) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Search for the Golden Boomerang, The* (1940) Episodes 1262, 1263, 1440, 1441, 1442, 1443.
 - These Men Tell Tales* (1947) "Joe MacFadden," Part 1 and "The Little Black Book," Part 1.
 - Thundering Hooves* (1948) Episodes 1 and 2.
 - Two Lives Have I* (1947) Episodes 5 and 6.
- [National Film and Sound Archive](#):
 - Courtship and Marriage* (1947) Series 1, Episodes 775-884.
 - Dad and Dave from Snake Gully* (1937) Episodes 3-2275 [slightly incomplete].
 - Martin's Corner* (1939) Episodes 3-146 [series unknown].
 - Search for the Golden Boomerang, The* (1940) Episodes 748-1441.
 - Tradesmen's Entrance* (1941).

- Library of Congress (USA). Recorded Sound Centre and Barry Brooks Collection:

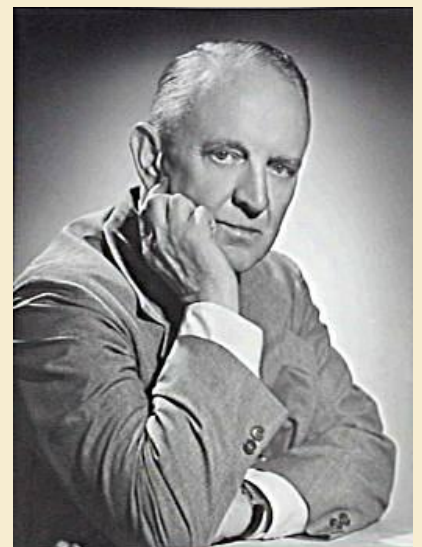
Adventures of Marco Polo (1940) Episodes 1-36) aka *Adventures of Marco Paolo*.
Afloat with Henry Morgan (1947) Episodes 1-4, 7-16, 27-31, 35-40, 43-46, 51-52.
Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp (n. yr.) Episodes 1-4.
Birth of the British Nation, The (1935) No 1, Parts 1-2: "Julius Caesar."
Black Arrow, The (1952). Episodes 1-4.
Black Lightning (1952) Episodes 1-4.
Courtship and Marriage (1947) Episodes 1-2.
Corsican Brothers, The (1945) Episodes 51-52.
Forrester's Wharf (n. yr.) Episode 1.
Great Expectations (n. yr.) Episodes 1-4.
Hunchback of Notre Dame (1935) Episodes 25-26.
Kidnapped (1935) Part 1.
Knights of the Round Table, The (1937) Episode 1, Parts 1-4: "The Coming of King Arthur."
Lord Oakburn's Daughters (1948) Episodes 1-4.
Messenger, The (n. yr.) Episodes 1-4.
Mystery Club, The (1937) Parts 1-2: "The Spark of Genius."
Old Goriot (1949) Episodes 1-4.
Old Man River (1948) Part 1: "Orleans by the Loire."
Paul Clifford (1943) Episodes 1-2.
Son of Porthos (1950) [possibly the complete series]
Story of Charles Peace, The (n. yr.) Part 1.
St Ronan's Well (1948) Episodes 1-4.
Tales from the Pen of Edgar Allan Poe (1941) Episodes 1-4.
Trilby (1949) Episodes 1-4, 7-8, 11-12, 15-18, 21-30.

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See also:

A: 5 Jan. (1925), 12.
AV: 5 July (1916), n. pag • 21 Dec. (1917), n. pag.
B: 22 July 1980, n. pag.
GR: Apr. (1918), 10. [photographs] • June (1922), 22.
RP: 1 July (1935), n. pag.
SMH: 14 Nov. (1936), 12 • 29 Aug (1953), n. pag.
WW: 24 Apr. (1931), 9, 23 Oct. (1931) • 6, 20, 27 Nov. (1931) • 4 Dec (1931) • 29 Jan. (1932) • 12 Feb. (1932) • 5 May (1933) • 20 Apr. (1934) • 4 Oct (1935) • 10 Jan (1936) • 29 Jan (1937) • 29 Apr (1938) • 6, 13, 20, 27 May (1938) – n. pages.



Source: www.radioarchives.com

Last updated: 16/07/2017

Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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