

W. J. CURTIS

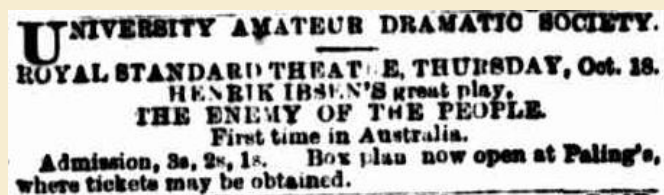
(1880-1940) Lawyer, librettist, director, actor, singer. During the early 1900s, W. J. Curtis balanced his university studies and later legal career with a heavy involvement in amateur theatre, first as an actor/singer and later as a librettist. A founding member of the Player's Club amateur theatre company, he was closely associated with its director Phillip Lytton. He was also involved with the Waverley Musical Society, and sang the basso parts in a popular quartet. In 1905 Curtis and W. Arundel Orchard collaborated on the comic opera *The Coquette*. They later wrote *The Emperor* (comic opera, 1906), *Ulla the Boatman* (cantata, 1909) and *Dorian Gray* (opera, 1919). Curtis also had a one act comedy, *The Amateur Burglar*, staged in 1908. His legal career saw him rise from lawyer to barrister, District Court Judge and King's Counsel (K.C.). He was additionally involved in the founding of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and served as a director of Harry Rickards Tivoli Theatres Ltd.

Described in one obituary as an "outstanding libel, divorce and criminal" lawyer, real "fighter" and "keen legal tactician,"¹ William John Young Curtis also showed a flair for theatrical writing. Indeed, during his relatively brief career in the theatre Curtis collaborated on several music theatre works with high profile Australian composer W. Arundel Orchard. Born in Sydney on 1 September 1880, the son of Peter Campbell Curtis² and Mary Elizabeth Dolman,³ he was educated at St Aloysius College⁴ prior to undertaking a law degree at Sydney University. *Freeman's Journal* describes him in 1900 as a "brilliant young graduate" and "a law student who will be heard of in the future."⁵ Although the decision to pursue a career in law was made early on in his youth, Curtis nevertheless maintained a passion for literature and the theatre throughout his years at school and at university.



Theatre Nov. (1906), 7.

Curtis's initial interest in performing appears to have as both as an actor and a singer. The earliest his name has been identified in connection with the stage (to date) is in 1900, but it is likely that he had appeared before audiences well before this. The 1900 stage performances included a smoke concert put on by St Joseph's College, Sydney, in May (at which represented the St Aloysius Oldboys),⁶ and a Sydney University Law School Reunion in June.⁷ That same year Curtis was appointed secretary of the Old Boys' Union of St Kilda and St. Aloysius's Colleges.⁸ His duties included organising smoke concerts and other social activities. On 18 October 1900 he also appeared at Sydney's Royal Standard Theatre with the Sydney University Amateur Dramatic Society in a production of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*. The *Evening News* notes that it had been several years since the Norwegian playwright's works had been performed in the city, and that the production had therefore generated much interest.⁹ Curtis was cast in the role of the printer, Aslasken.



Sydney Morning Herald 10 Oct. (1900), 2.

¹ "Obituary: Mr W. J. Curtis K.C." *Age* 25 May (1940), 31.

² Before his death, Peter Curtis rose to the position of Chief Clerk in Equity of the Supreme Court, Sydney (ctd. "Brevities." *Evening News* 16 Aug. 1904, 2).

³ New South Wales Births, Deaths and Marriages Reg. No. 7884/1880 Curtis (unnamed) in the district St. George. Parents are father Peter Campbell Curtis and mother Mary Elizabeth Curtis (nee Dolman). **Birth notice** published in *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 September 1880, 1. "Births: September 1 at London Street, Enmore – Mrs. Peter C. Curtis, of a son." Information courtesy of Kim Sheppard (emails 28 Dec. 2013 and 25 June 2016).

⁴ During his time as an Aloysius student the college was located in Bourke Street, Darlinghurst. It had previously operated as a school out of St Kilda House, Woolloomooloo (1879-1883). In 1903 the school relocated to its present site at Milson's Point.

⁵ "Personal." *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney) 14 April 1900: 12.

⁶ "St. Joseph's College Ex-Students' Union: Annual Smoke Concert." *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 19 May (1900), 13.

⁷ "Law School Reunion." *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 June (1900), 6.

⁸ [no title] *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney) 30 June (1900), 3. Curtis continued to serve as the Union's Honourable Secretary until the 1906 elections. He was afterwards a committee member.

⁹ "Amusements." *Evening News* (Sydney) 13 Oct. (1900), 3. Interestingly, although the Australian public had been aware of Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* since at least 1890, a Trove search appears to confirm the above advertisement's claim that Sydney University's Amateur Dramatic Society was the first company to stage the play in Australia.

In 1902 Curtis undertook an M.A. degree through the University of Sydney's School of Philosophy (in Education), passing the examination in 1903 with his thesis, "The State in Relation to Education."¹⁰ By the end of the year he was well into his preparation for his final examinations.¹¹ His eventual success was highlighted by the Catholic newspaper, *Freeman's Journal* in March 1904:

We are pleased to learn that Mr. W. J. Curtis, M.A. has just graduated, LL.B. at the Sydney University. This brilliant young Australian, who should prove a most decided acquisition to the ranks of our Bar advocates, is a grandson of two of our old citizens who will long be held green in the memory of Sydney people — the late James Curtis and the late William Dolman. The new Bachelor of Law was educated at St. Aloysius' College and the Sydney University.¹²

Curtis was eventually admitted to the Bar of New South Wales on 15 August 1904, with the formalities undertaken before the Full Court yesterday, and on the motion of Attorney-General, Mr. J. C. Gannon.¹³

During this same period Curtis was also actively involved in numerous extracurricular pursuits, including concerts with the Catholic Young Men's Association (as a singer) and theatrical productions with the Waverley Musical Society and the newly formed Players' Club. As a singer during the early 1900s Curtis often performed with the Lyric Quartet - the others being J. Comans, Paul Tracey (tenor), Frank Tracey (baritone).¹⁴ Curtis sang the bass parts. The foursome is known to have appeared as far away as Bathurst, New South Wales (1903).¹⁵

PALACE THEATRE.
THIS AFTERNOON (Saturday) THIS AFTERNOON,
At 2.30.
The Juvenile Players. The Juvenile Players.
A Unique! Brilliant! Australian Dramatic Event!
Under Mr. PHILIP LYTTON'S direction.
Will produce for the first time on any Stage
Mr. J. C. LEE'S new and original 3-act Comedy, entitled
"THE MARRYING OF MA."
Mrs. Maria Alberta Weatherby (a victim to misrule
Miss Lillian (the pride of the family)..... Miss Rita Mitchell
Miss Molly (the matchmaker)..... Miss Lottie Linden
Master Billy (the family sport)..... Miss Olive Pearce
Master Edgar (the philosopher)..... Miss Vera Moclair
Miss Ida { Two of the match- } Miss Poppy Braby
Miss Mabel { makers } Miss Mabel Eckhardt
Master Johnny { The Imps } Little Dorothy M'Gowan
Master Alie { } Little Doris Moclair
Cissy { The mischievous } Little Gracie Spry
Bella { twins } Little Erica Spry
Assisted by
Mr. Rodger Campbell; { Both in search } Mr. W. J. Curtis
Mr. Hercules Robinson } of a wife { Mr. Philip Lytton
Act I.—Ma's Objection. Act II.—Ma's Courtship.
Act III.—Ma's Consent.
PRICES OF ADMISSION: 3s, 2s, and 1s. Children
half price to all parts of the house.
S. CRAWFORD-BINNY, Hon. Secretary.

THE WEVERLEY FAIR.
ST. CHARLES' HALL, CHARING CROSS.
GRAND CONCERT, TO-NIGHT.
Artists: Miss Julia Davies, Miss Aiken, Miss Hall, Miss
Walsh, Master K. Kennedy, Mr. A. Jones, and the Lyric
Quartette.
TUESDAY—Little Eileen Boyd.
WEDNESDAY—The Players' Club.
Ping Pong, Shooting Galleries, Comic Competition.

Sydney Morning Herald 16 Aug. (1902), 2.

It was with the Philip Lytton-led Players Club, that Curtis was best known during his early theatrical career, however. Cast by Lytton in the Club's 1902 debut production (Pinero's comedy *The Weaker Sex*), he reportedly drew much laughter for his portrayal as the "nervously stammering Mr Bargus M.P."¹⁶ Other Players' Club productions in which he appeared included J. C. Lee's *The Marrying of Ma*, N. Parker's *The Man in the Street*, Pinero's *The*

Hobby Horse (1902); Ohnet's *The Iron Master*, E. G. Lankester's *The Gov'nor*, Pinero's *The Magistrate* and *Dandy Dick* (1903); Charles Hawtrey's *The Private Secretary*, and *Tom, Dick and Harry* (1904).

PROSCENIUM DROP CURTAIN, Exterior Cloth, and
6 Wood Wings, best quality, almost new, for
SALE, cheap; also, Grand PIANO. Apply
W. J. CURTIS, The Friary, Waverley.

Sydney Morning Herald 13 Jan. (1904), 2.

Curtis' growing stature within the Sydney theatrical community saw him regarded by some commentators as having some considerable ability as both an actor and author. A *Theatre Magazine* critic, writing in advance of the Curtis/Orchard production of *The Emperor* in 1906, refers to the young librettist, for example, as a man "whose pen is never idle in regard to writing for the stage."¹⁷ Reviews of his performances indicate that he was especially suited to comedy roles. Indicative of the comments made were those published in the *Evening News* ("Mr. W. J. Curtis made a funny American in that impossible character Pontius P. Pedglft")¹⁸ and *Sydney Morning Herald* ("Mr W. J. Curtis grotesquely made-up as old Macclesfield, was decidedly funny in his assumption of deafness and exasperating

¹⁰ "University of Sydney." *Sydney Morning Herald* 2 Apr. (1903), 9.

¹¹ "Bookworm's Corner: The Aloysiad, The." *Freeman's Journal* 2 Jan. (1904), 20.

¹² "Personal." *Freeman's Journal* 26 Mar. (1904), 26.

¹³ "Brevities." *Evening News* 16 Aug. 1904, 2.

¹⁴ See for example: "Entertainment by Waverley C.Y.M.A." 24 Mar. (1902), 23; and "Amusements." *Evening News* (Sydney) 4 May (1903), 8.

¹⁵ "Evening Session." *National Advocate* (Bathurst, NSW) 29 Dec. (1903), 2.

¹⁶ "Amusements: The Players Club." *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 June (1902), 5.

¹⁷ *Theatre Magazine* Sept. (1906), 6.

¹⁸ "Amusements." *Evening News* (Sydney) 28 Feb. (1903), 2.

stupidity).¹⁹ The *Theatre* also notes in 1905 that as Bronson Pere in Lytton's production of *The Belle of New York*²⁰, Curtis "brought out all the dry humour of the past and "Praps" was given in a manner which was quite up to the standard of the professional stage."²¹ In addition to his acting roles Curtis undertook directorial duties on a number of occasions, the first identified to date being the Waverley Musical Society's 1903 production of *The Gay Parisienne*.²² He also took on acting roles in other Waverley productions, including *The French Maid* (1903),

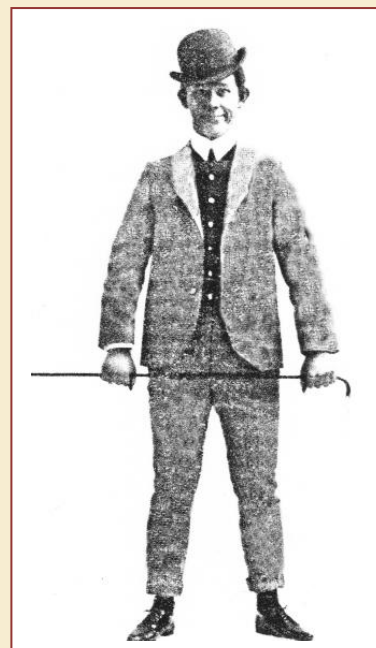
The first work known to have come from Curtis's pen and to have been staged was *The Coquette* (1905), co-written with John Hunt to a score by W. Arundel Orchard. The comic opera received much pre-publicity in Sydney, due in no small measure to the high profiles and strong connections all three creatives had within the city's theatrical, musical and social worlds. While this did not guarantee that the production itself would be free from criticism, it appears that on the whole the work was well-received. Of the three men, Orchard came in for perhaps the most criticism, his score being seen as somewhat lacking in melody:²³

As to the piece itself, the various situations are cleverly managed, the development of an original plot, though run on conventional lines, is ingenious and humorous, while Mr. Curtis has written some good lyrics, and he and Mr. Hunt have evolved some distinctly amusing dialogues and witticisms. Mr. Orchard's important share in the opera shows much musical taste, particularly with regard to the orchestration of the work given to the band, the accompaniment to the dances and choruses being rich and taking, but there is rather a want of melodies of the "catchy" order, for with the exception of the "Colombo" refrain there are few airs that suggest that they will shortly be whistled about the streets, the surest touchstone of popular favour.²⁴

Curtis' performance in the role of Jeremy Pymble was particularly well-favoured by the critics, both for his comic acting and his singing. Among the published comments are the following:

Mr W. J. Curtis played the principal part as Jeremy Pymble and made a hit with his first song, "My Friends, I Thank You," in which the business of the chorus was neatly carried out and generally he played with humour and confidence.²⁵

The Coquette is mainly concerned with the efforts made by Jeremy Pymble, an insurance agent (played with great cleverness and vivacity by Mr. Curtis)... Mr. Curtis was the most popular figure in the piece, and was deservedly applauded for his efforts, his first entrance being the occasion for a capital song and chorus.²⁶



W. J. Curtis as Jeremy Pymble.
Theatre Magazine 1 Sept. (1905), 12.

The following year Curtis's comedy *The Amateur Burglar* was produced by the Sydney Muffs amateur theatre society over two nights at Sydney's Criterion Theatre (1-2 August). This was in fact a dramatised adaptation of W. W. Jacobs' short story *The Boatswain's Mate* (1905). The *Sydney Morning Herald* notes: "Whist the general outline of the original story and the trend of the dialogue have been followed, the two days action has been limited for the sake of dramatic unity to a few minutes... [and thus] cleverly condensed so as to form a curtain-raiser which professional companies should hereafter find of much service."²⁷

Later in 1906 Curtis' second collaboration with Arundel Orchard, *The Emperor* brought the pair much critical praise, and a more than respectable one-month season, when they produced the work themselves at Sydney's Palace Theatre (on a meagre budget of some four to five hundred pounds). Both the composer and librettist were called before the audience after the premiere. Part of Curtis's curtain speech was reported in the *Theatre Magazine*:

There were no prophets in one's country, and if possible fewer profits even than that - [to much laughter]... at a later date they hoped to stage the piece in London, and there reap the reward of their labour. [The] principles and chorus had worked like Trojans without return of any kind, and he felt that he owed them a debt of gratitude it would be impossible to repay. [Cheers] He knew many friends who would be glad to learn that, in spite of an outlay of about £400 for the week's season, no loss had resulted. [Cheers]²⁸

¹⁹ "Theatre Royal: The Players." *Sydney Morning Herald* 7 Apr. (1903), 6.

²⁰ Staged by the Players' Musical Comedy Society (Lyceum Theatre, Sydney; 22-24 Mar.).

²¹ *Theatre Magazine* 1 Apr. 1905, 13. The play was presented in Sydney by the Players Theatre Company, ca. Mar. 1905.

²² Staged at the Lyceum Theatre, Sydney beginning 16 May 1903.

²³ Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* was a notable exception, with the critic suggesting "Whatever success comes of the new opera is derived mainly from its music... the "libretto is distinctly the weak part of the work [and] the lyrics possess no overwhelming literary merit and their metre is halting here and there" (ctd. "Musical and Dramatic Notes." *West Australian* 9 Sept. 1905, 9).

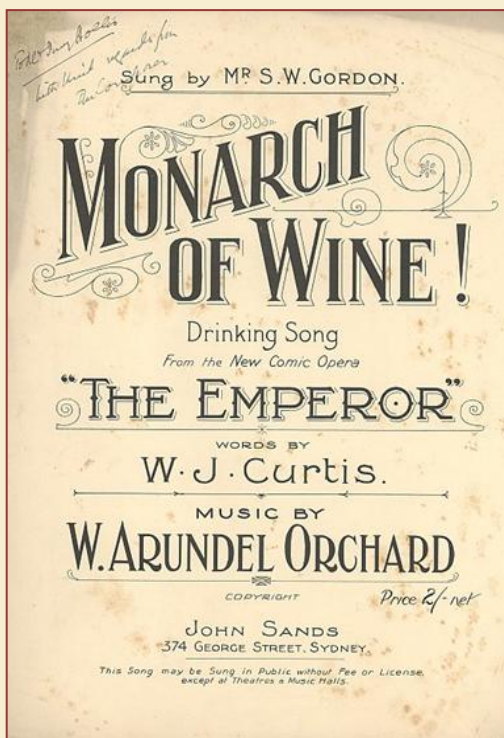
²⁴ "New Comic Opera." *Australian Town and Country Journal* (Sydney) 30 Aug. (1905), 10.

²⁵ "Palace Theatre - *The Coquette*." *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 Aug. (1905), 8.

²⁶ "*Coquette* at the Palace Theatre, The." *Evening News* (Sydney) 29 Aug. (1905), 7.

²⁷ "Amusements: Sydney Muffs at the Criterion." *Sydney Morning Herald* 2 Aug. (1906), 9. See "Historical Notes" section below for more details.

²⁸ *Theatre Magazine* 1 Dec. 1906, 13.



Source: National Library of Australia.

Curtis's reference to the paucity of prophets/profits may well have been in response to comments published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* following the premiere of *The Coquette*. The paper's observation in relation to the quality of that original Australian production and the local audiences, was that it represented "the kind of comic opera which runs for about fifty nights in London, which is tantamount to admitting that it is not equal to the only standard with which Australian playgoers are acquainted. That is to say [it] would be quite favourably reviewed by the London critics... but it would never reach Australia. The only pieces with which our audiences are acquainted are those which have made gigantic successes in London."²⁹

W. J. Curtis's talent as a librettist was at least recognised by some critics, an aspect often missing from reviews of the work of other local authors, both professional and amateur. A review of his narrative construction for *The Emperor* suggested, for example that Orchard's "captivating music" was scored to a "well defined... genuinely witty [and] amusingly effective plot." The same critic went on further to record that "Mr Curtis has written some excellent lyrics, and his dialogue is bright and pungent, and in the second act the lines on "life," previous to the quintet, have a sound philosophical ring, that shows that the author is a keen observer of human nature."³⁰

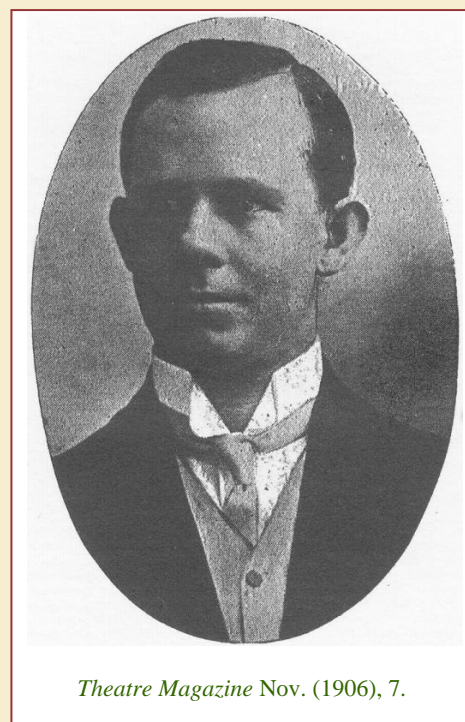
In 1908 Curtis and Orchard collaborated on another work, the cantata *Ulla, the Bowman*. It was given its premiere performance at a concert by the Sydney Liedertafel at the Sydney Town Hall on 8 September 1909 under Orchard's conductorship. Three years later the score was published in London by Laudy and Co (a German edition was also published). In response to that publication *Ulla the Bowman* was revived several times in 1913, with two performances in Sydney, and one (possibly two) in Brisbane. Each concert was performed by the respective city's Liedertafel Society. A *Sydney Morning Herald* music and drama critic, in writing about the lack of due recognition paid to "the Australian worker in musical art," said of Curtis and Orchard's effort: "it is worth a good many of the customary 'tuneful' cantatas which so frequently have acceptance, and for no reason other than they come from England." Concerning the work itself, the critic wrote:

Mr Curtis has written an uncommonly good poem, in which the old Norse battleground of the gods and the giants is deftly and gracefully exploited... [while] Mr Orchard's music... has music vigour and picturesqueness where the descriptive passages are called for, while the love episodes of Scardi is handled with much feeling.³¹

1908 also saw him become involved with the founding of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. At the inaugural meeting Arundel Orchard was appointed Conductor and Curtis Honourable Secretary.³²

The only other known theatrical work by Curtis is the opera, *Dorian Gray*, based on Oscar Wilde's novel. The music, again by Arundel Orchard, was scored to a blank verse libretto. Although announced as having being completed in 1916,³³ it was not until 1919 that the public got to hear any of the work, and then only the second act. This was presented as a concert version at the Conservatorium of Music, Sydney on 11 September.³⁴ No staged version of the full work appears to have been undertaken. Interestingly, Orchard doesn't mention the work in his autobiography.

While Curtis was obliged to lessen his active involvement in stage performance and libretti-writing from the early 1910s in response to his increasingly hectic legal career, he nevertheless remained closely aligned to the theatre as a



Theatre Magazine Nov. (1906), 7.

²⁹ See "**Palace Theatre: *The Coquette*."** *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 Aug. (1905), 8.

³⁰ *Theatre Magazine* 1 Dec. (1906), 12.

³¹ "**Music and Drama.**" *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 Feb. (1913), 6.

³² "**Musical Matters.**" *Evening News* (Sydney) 23 May (1908), 7.

³³ "**Music and Drama.**" *Sydney Morning Herald* 26 Feb. (1916), 8.

³⁴ "**Music and Drama.**" *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 Sept. (1919), 8.

director and shareholder in the [Hugh D. McIntosh](#)-led Tivoli circuit (known legally as [Harry Rickards' Tivoli Theatres Ltd](#)). The *Sydney Sun* records in 1928 that Curtis's shares in the company were 5,000.³⁵ The *Sun's* interest at that time, as with several other newspapers, was in covering the company's purchase of the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney from the family of [Harry Rickards](#). Some two years later, however, Curtis was accorded much unwanted publicity in the wake of the company's financial collapse and eventual liquidation. While McIntosh bore the brunt of newspaper coverage, the role of Curtis and several other directors, as well as aspects of their financial status, were frequently mentioned. They were also questioned by the liquidator and in court regarding their knowledge of several serious financial matters. In 1932 McIntosh and Curtis, along with another director, Edmund Covell, were each charged with fraud. The liquidator's accusation was that the three men had tried to hide a cheque for £13,750.³⁶ All three were eventually acquitted.

On 21 November 1936 Curtis's second wife committed suicide after having spent some considerable time suffering from a nervous breakdown. She was aged 32. At the time of her death she and her husband were separated, with Curtis having custody of their two small children. Three years later he moved to Springwood in the Blue Mountains, commuting to the city on a regular basis for work. He died of a heart attack eight months later on 23 May 1940. Survived by a daughter from his first marriage and a young son and daughter from his second, Curtis's estate was valued at £2,700.³⁷ Interestingly Lalla Curtis' estate, which included an inheritance from her father, was more than £50,000.³⁸ In reflecting on his life and career the *Sydney Morning Herald* records:

For many years, Mr. Curtis had had a very large practice at common law. He appeared as counsel in many notable causes, principally libel and defamation actions. His outstanding ability as an advocate before a jury, in presenting the salient facts of his case, and in exposing the weaknesses of the other side, was generally recognised.... He was called to the Bar in 1904, and was appointed a K.C. in 1925. Many years ago, he was appointed an Acting District Court Judge³⁹... Mr. Curtis devoted much of his leisure time to music, and in his earlier years to amateur theatricals. Recognising Mr. Curtis's ability as an actor in his younger days, Mr. J. C. Williamson tried strongly to induce him to take up the stage as a career. One of his last appearances in amateur theatricals was in a leading role in *Floradora* when it was staged by the Mosman Musical Society.⁴⁰ He was [also] closely associated with the formation of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.⁴¹

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- **1903:** Mr. W. J. Curtis as the shining light that went out was strongly reminiscent of George Lauri, but marred an excellent impersonation by smiling in his most sanctimonious moments [*The Gay Parisienne*].⁴²
- **1903:** The character of Mr. Posket was ably sustained by Mr. W. J. Curtis, and his work throughout was of a high order [*The Magistrate*].⁴³
- **1903:** Mr. W. J. Curtis, the leading comedian of the amateurs, was entrusted with the part of the Dean. Although his gait was rather youthful he performed well. His brother, Mr. Harold Curtis, gave a clever reading of the ancient butler, Blore [*Dandy Dick*].⁴⁴
- **1904:** On Saturday evening last the members of the Players Club entertained Mr. W. J. Curtis, M.A., LL.B., at dinner at the A.B.C. rooms, Pitt-street. Mr. Curtis was the recipient of an illuminated address signed by the members of the club, in which they congratulated him upon his success at the recent university examinations, and expressed their appreciation of the good work he had done in connection with the amateur stage. He was also presented with a handsome silver inkstand and pen.⁴⁵



³⁵ "[Tivoli Theatres](#)." *Sun* (Sydney) 19 September (1928), 14.

³⁶ "[Tivoli Case: Sharp Exchanges in Court](#)." *Canberra Times* 21 Sept. (1932), 3.

³⁷ "[Will of Mr W. J. Curtis](#)." *Sydney Morning Herald* 10 Oct. (1940), 8.

³⁸ "[How K.C.'s Wife Went to a Lonely Death](#)." *Truth* (Sydney) 29 Nov. (1936), 1. See Historical Notes section below (3) for further details relating to Lalla Curtis's death.

³⁹ The *Bathurst Times* records that Curtis was appointed a District Court Judge on 5 February 1920 ("[District Court Judges](#)." 5 Feb. 1920, 2)

⁴⁰ This was possibly the Mosman Musical Society's 1922 production, staged at the Mosman Town Hall beginning 9 May.

⁴¹ "Mr Curtis, K.C.: Leading Barrister's Death" 20.

⁴² "[The Gay Parisienne](#)." *Newsletter* (Sydney) 23 May (1903), 7.

⁴³ "[The Players](#)." *Australian Star* 29 June (1903), 3

⁴⁴ "[Amusements](#)." *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 16 Sept. (1903), 747.

⁴⁵ [[untitled](#)] *Sydney Morning Herald* 24 May (1904), 6.

- **1930:** Bill never uses a verbal axe when a rapier can be more effective, never bullies a witness, and calls on all the subtleties of the forensic art to gain his point.⁴⁶

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. While studying law in the early 1900s Curtis also found time to represent Sydney University in its third grade cricket team (as a batsman).⁴⁷
2. In 1902 Curtis entered the *Freeman Journal's* Essay Competition. Open for any member of a society affiliated with the Catholic Young Men's Union, the essay subject was "Ireland's Claim to Self-government." Each entrant had to use a pen-name. Curtis, who chose as his nom deplume, "Vindicavit," was one of five entrants shortlisted for the final selection.⁴⁸ Although he did not win the competition, his essay, as with each of the shortlisted entrants, was published in the newspaper in early 1903.⁴⁹
3. On 2 November 1912, aged 31, Curtis married 18-year old Ella Blau at St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney. His bride was the daughter of Austrian merchant Julius Blau (then the Australian agent for the French perfume 4711). The



Eva Curtis (nee Blau)
Punch (Melbourne) 14 Nov. (1912),

couple took up residence at Dragam (Hungarian for Darling) in Point Piper, but their marriage lasted only twelve years, and produced only one child, a daughter. Given his prominence as a divorce lawyer, Curtis' personal affairs made fodder for the Sydney press, and in particular the *Truth* newspaper, which announced the barrister's application for the restitution of his conjugal rights with the headline: "Billy Curtis's Vain Pleadings: Wifie's Love Grown Cold"⁵⁰

SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Miss Lalla Moss and Mr. W. J. Curtis, K.C., whose engagement is just announced. Miss Moss is the only daughter of the late H. B. Moss and Mrs. F. M. Moss, at present resident in London. Miss Moss has just returned from a 14 months' tour of the world. The marriage takes place early next year, when the honeymoon will be a world tour.

Sunday Times (Sydney) 3 Oct. (1926), 19.

⁴⁶ "H. D. McIntosh, M.L.C., W. J. Curtis, K.C., To Answer Bankruptcy Petition." *Truth* (Sydney) 14 Dec. (1930), 17.

⁴⁷ "Third Grade." *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 Jan. (1902), 4.

⁴⁸ "Freeman Prize Essay." *Freeman's Journal* 26 Jan. (1903), 26.

⁴⁹ "'Vindicavit' by W. J. Curtis." "Freeman Essay Competition: Ireland's Claim to Self-government." *Freeman's Journal* 14 Feb. (1903), 36.

⁵⁰ *Truth* (Sydney) 31 Aug. (1924), 11.

Curtis married his second wife, Alice Esther (Lalla) Moss, with much secrecy on 18 December 1926 at the remote St Peter's Church, Watson's Bay. The only daughter of the late Mr. E. B. Moss and Mrs. F. M. Moss of Woollahra, Lalla had only recently returned to Australia from a 14 month world tour when the engagement was announced in October. Both parties kept the marriage date from the press, however, and subsequently all reports relating to the event were published only after it had occurred.

The extensive newspaper coverage of Lalla Curtis's suicide in 1936 was not surprising given both the prominence of her husband and her own privileged background. According to these reports the couple had been separated for some 18 months, with William continuing to reside with their children at the family home in Collaroy. Lalla was living with two aunts and under medical care for a highly nervous and debilitated condition. Evidence given at the coroner's inquests showed that she had twice before taken an overdosed of sleeping tablets. Several newspapers also record that she had been seen by no fewer than eight doctors. On the day of her death Lalla returned unannounced to the Collaroy home where she took a number of sleeping tablets. She was found dead in the bathroom when Curtis returned from a game of golf.

- For further details see Trove ("[Lalla Curtis](#)" / "[22 November - 13 December](#)"). A report on the coroner's verdict appears in the Truth 13 December 1936, 14-15 ("[Life Too Cruel, Say's K.C.'s Wife](#)").



**W.J. Curtis King's Council, New South Wales,
10 December 1927**



**The newly-weds - Mr and Mrs W.J. Curtis outside St Peter's Church,
Watson's Bay, 18 Dec. 1926.**

Fairfax Archive, National Library of Australia

4. In June 1904 Curtis felt compelled to add his support to a complaint submitted to the *Sydney Morning Herald* by "Scholastic" who felt that the recent Sydney University examinations, particularly those from the Departments of Classics and Mathematics, had been set at a much harder level than in previous years.⁵¹ In his assessment of the mathematics paper, Curtis argued that the examiners had not only gone beyond the limits set down in the University manual, but that in one instance (the algebra paper) they had included a question that the department had expressly stated "would not be included as matter for examinations until 1905." He went on to further suggest that "throughout the geometry and algebra papers the whole object of the examiners seemed to be to show their superiority as exponents of the English language and as constructors of showy and trick mathematical gymnastics."⁵² The following week Curtis again begged the indulgence of the *Herald's* editor to clarify, in a much longer letter, his previous objections to the harshness of the junior examinations.⁵³
5. Curtis's connection with the Aloysius' College Old Boys Union dates back to its founding on 15 December 1898 as the Old Boys of St Aloysius and St Kilda College. The elected office-bearers included Curtis as Honourable

⁵¹ "Scholastic." "[The University Examinations of 1904: To the Editor of the Herald.](#)" *Sydney Morning Herald* 15 July (1904), 6.

⁵² Curtis, W. J. "[The University Examinations 1904: To the Editor of the Herald.](#)" *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 July (1904), 6.

⁵³ Curtis, W. J. "[Junior Examinations: To the Editor of the Herald.](#)" *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 July (1904), 10.

Secretary. A constitution was also framed.⁵⁴ In addition to maintaining his association with Union, Curtis also donated gifts and medals to later students. The first identified to date was the mathematics medal awarded to class champion Stephane Playoust in 1903.⁵⁵ He donated the same gift to Charles Howard the following year.⁵⁶

6. Curtis' brother Harold was also active in the Sydney theatre scene during the early 1900s.⁵⁷
7. Among the newspaper reports published in relation to the collapse of the Tivoli firm, and W. J. Curtis's involvement, were "**H. D. McIntosh, M.L.C., W. J. Curtis, K.C., To Answer Bankruptcy Petition.**" *Truth* (Sydney) 14 Dec. (1930), 17; "**In Equity.**" *Sydney Morning Herald* 28 Aug. (1931), 5; "**Heated Exchanges: Case of Alleged Fraud - Rickards Theatres' Directors.**" *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA) 21 Sept. (1932), 4; "**Business Chiefs' Dramatic Acquittal: Embittered Legal Fight Ends.**" *Truth* (Sydney) 2 Oct. (1932), 17.

Interestingly, although Hugh McIntosh won a defamation suit against the *Truth* newspaper in 1931, he was awarded only a farthing in damages. See: "**Asked for £2,500 - Got a Farthing!**" *Truth* (Sydney) 13 Sept. (1931), 13, 11.

8. Curtis is mentioned in *Radical Newcastle* (2015) in connection with the inquest into the death of Norman Brown, the miner who was shot during the 1929 Rothbury miners' lockout in 1929.
9. ***The Amateur Burglar* (1906):** A dramatised version of W. W. Jacobs' short story, *The Boatswain's Mate* (aka *The Bosun's Mate*), the narrative tells of an avaricious old rascal who gets up a sham burglary in order to win a buxom widow and secure a nice little business.⁵⁸ In his adaptation Curtis retained much of the original story's dramatic outline and 'trend of the dialogue,' but collapsed the events, which takes place over two days, into the time played out on stage. *The Boatswain's Mate* was first published in Jacob's 1905 short story collection *Captains All*. Its first known public stage performance in Australia was a recital by **Lawrence Campbell** at Sydney's St James's Hall the month prior to Curtis's theatrical production. Produced by the Sydney Muffs amateur theatre company, and under the direction of Curtis, the cast comprised R. B. Orchard (Old Ben), Blandford Wright (Ned Travers), and Meta Hayter (Mrs Waters).⁵⁹ *The Amateur Burglar* was also staged with Arthur Law's farcical comedy *The New Boy*. The performances were held over the nights of 1 and 2 August and presented in aid of the United Dental Hospital of Sydney.
10. ***The Man in the Moon; Or, A Trip to Mars* (1907):** Following the success of *The Coquette* and *The Emperor* Curtis and W. Arundel Orchard collaborated on another music theatre work, taking much of the music from their first comic opera and interpolating it into a new libretto. The new work appears to have been completed but no production is believed to have eventuated. A manuscript version is held in the "Papers of Dr. William Arundel Orchard (1867-1961). National Library of Australia [MS 5782].

MUSIC / MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1905: **The Coquette** [comic opera]
1906: **The Emperor** [comic opera]
1907: **The Man in the Moon; Or, A Trip to Mars** [comic opera - unperformed]
1909: **Uller the Bowman** [cantata]
1919: **Dorian Gray** [opera]

ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS (Published)

♪ = digital copy of score available online via Australian National Library (ANL) • Other scores held by the ANL.

- 1906: **Two Songs: "The Love That Maid Has Given" / "Than Heart Has Known"** (Curtis/Orchard) [Sydney: John Sands]
♪ "Monarch of Wine" (Curtis/Orchard)
1912: **"Uller the Boatman": A Dramatic Poem for Soprano, Baritone, Male Chorus and Orchestra** (Curtis/Orchard) [London: Laudy and Co]

⁵⁴ "St. Aloysius College Old Boys' Union." *Australian Star* (Sydney) 19 Dec. (1898), 8.

⁵⁵ "St Aloysius College." *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 19 Dec. (1903), 63.

⁵⁶ "St Aloysius College." *Catholic Press* (Sydney) 15 Dec. (1904), 63.

⁵⁷ "Amusements." *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 16 Sept. (1903), 747.

⁵⁸ "A Master of Craft." *Leader* (Melbourne) 30 Dec. (1905), 32.

⁵⁹ For further information relating to Meta Hayter (aka Mrs Bennett White) see **The Cheer-Oh Girls** AVTA entry.

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

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