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Absent Voices:

Resurfacing Walter Bentley's Leading Ladies (May Brookyn, Florence Grant, Minnie Brandon and Melba Watt) in the late-Nineteenth Century



Figure 1. Walter Bentley, 1891, photographed by Vandyck Studio, Melbourne. Private Collection.

My grandfather, Walter Bentley (1849-1927), a Scottish tragedian (Fig. 1), once juvenile lead to Henry Irving, was on the stage in the UK, US, and Australasia, from the 1870s through to the 1910s. As I delve into his archive of five scrapbooks in Sydney's Mitchell Library, I discover that his leading ladies — some of whom were critical to his career *and* his private life — are almost entirely absent. Only late in life, when he was in his seventies and on his sickbed, did he reflect on the contributions that Melba Watt — at least his second, if not third wife — was making to the College of Elocution that Bentley ran. As Bentley's life slipped into oblivion, so too have those of his leading ladies. In this article, I bring these actresses' submerged histories back to the surface in order to restore them to the historical record, and to demonstrate their agency beyond Bentley.

Frank Benson, who saved Walter Bentley's Shakespearean Company from bankruptcy in 1883, described Bentley as taking "the primrose path of dalliance" ("Dallied with his art", 3), setting the tone for one avenue of inquiry about Bentley's romantic conquests of his leading ladies. In her own revisionist feminist historiographical project, Katherine Newey avers that Sos Eltis's theatrical and social masculinist ideologies are more interesting than the clichés of seduction which we take for granted in the theatre (2016, 193). There was social pressure for women who sought independence and an income through a career on the stage because, in the public mind, both actresses and prostitutes were linked. In colonial Australia, some actresses openly defied social conventions, living in de-facto relationships, as both Minnie Brandon and Melba Watt did with Bentley.

There were indeed a number of women whose lives became entwined with Bentley's. Newspaper archives in Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand have frequent reports of affairs and marriages, revealing the actresses whose lives on the stage were tied to Bentley's. I have selected three actresses to whom Bentley was said to be married: May Brookyn, a leading lady in America; Florence Grant, a tragedienne in Britain; and Melba Watt, an aspiring actress in Sydney. I also introduce Bentley's *de facto* partner in Brisbane, Australian actress Minnie Brandon, and do so to restore all four women to the international historiographical record – in relation to, and independently of, Bentley. Katherine Newey speculates that "making visible women's lives, work and relationships to power is an ethical imperative for feminist history" (2016, 88). Accordingly, I apply a feminist lens to my recuperative history, which exposes the gendered hierarchy of the stage and, in particular, the power which Bentley exercised over his leading ladies. Ironically, Bentley himself is largely absent from theatre history, being merely a footnote in a number of studies; however, his absence has also sealed the fate of the actresses on stage with him.

Theatre historians have sought various lenses in their recuperative histories of actresses, from Josie Fantasia's focus on gender as "a useful category of historical analysis because it is akin to writing a 'new' history" (1992, 157), to Susan Pfisterer-Smith's suggestion that the "story of women in Australian drama ... is a vital part of international feminist research" (1993, 8). In her account of *The Three Nobodies: Autobiographical strategies in the work of Alma Ellerslie, Kitty Marion and Ina Rozant'*, Viv Gardner proposes, because of the "ordinariness" of her subjects, they are "especially interesting in a period in which 'celebrity' auto/biography had become a commonplace" (10). While writing on Jessie H. Wilton, Jim Davis contends "the unwritten lives of such performers are just as crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the way in which the theatre operated in nineteen-century Britain" (1992, 107). Challenges experienced by Victorian actresses have been addressed by several scholars, including Tracy Davis in her work *Actresses as Working Women* (1991), a seminal reference for the recent surveys by Jan Sewell and Clare Smout (2020), and Janice Norwood (2021). Regarding actresses in Australia, there remain many to resurface, although recent studies include Veronica Kelly on Lily Brayton (2006), Jane Woppard on Eliza Winstanley (2016), and Janette Gordon-Clark on Essie Jenyns (2002), have recovered the working lives of actresses on the Australian stage.

May Brookyn



Figure 2. May Brookyn in *Alabama*, A.M. Palmer's Company. Courtesy of Randy Everts, formerly University of Wisconsin, 9 December 2021.

finished in early 1884, he signed a contract for the 1884–85 season for *Burr Oaks*, under J.S. Alexander, proprietor, and manager.¹ Finally, Brookyn left Palmer's Company and joined Bentley, playing his leading lady, playing Margie, the wife of *Burr Oaks*.

The Enquirer wrote that Brookyn and Bentley were leading actors and "conscientious, pains-taking artists, [...] far in advance of the average players of the day" (*The Enquirer*). Their personal relationship quickly came to the attention of American audiences of critics. One critic announced their impending marriage (*Fort Wayne Gazette*), while another in McAllen, Texas, complained that there was "a little too much love-making in an over-hearty way, which prolongs the play and cuts it short in the finer passages and sentiments so well-defined by Miss Brookyn and Mr Bentley".² Other reviews referred to Brookyn as Mrs Walter Bentley. *Burr Oaks* was on the road for ten months, closing in February 1885.

Bentley had another "sensational melodrama" ready, *Love or Money*, his adaptation of Charles Reade's novel, *A Perilous Secret*. The season began in March 1885 with Bentley playing the hero, William Hope, while Brookyn played his wife, Grace. Brookyn was described in Philadelphia as "a lovely young English actress, with whom we have had but too slight an acquaintance, [she] presents a most touching and well-balanced Margie, the tantalised but true wife of the hero".³ As in the script of *Burr Oaks*, *Love or Money* provided Bentley and Brookyn with opportunity to act with passion, particularly, according to one critic, with "something seldom rivalled for tenderness, and for force,

British-born May Brookyn (d.o.b unknown – 1894; Fig.2) was drawn to the theatre as a child and was quite young when she appeared on the stage. She developed her career touring in the British provinces, taking various roles in different companies. In April 1883, she was a "graceful and tender Lady Constance but was scarcely passionate enough" in *Comrades* (*Derby Daily Telegraph* 2), and in July she played Pauline "in a very poor style" (*The Referee* 8/7/1883 3) in *The Lady of Lyons*. She was recruited by Wilson Barnett to a touring company to play Neville Denver in *The Silver King* (*The Referee* 17/6/1883 3), but when Barnett suggested Bentley for the lead role of an American tour of *The Silver King*, he took Brookyn with him. Bentley soon discovered his American contract gave him no authority or independence to appoint his own leading lady in the new company being formed to stage *The Silver King*. Brookyn joined A.M. Palmer's Company at Madison Square Theatre.

When Bentley's season with *The Silver King*

not of the ranting kind, but of the subdued, genteel and pathetic sort that sends handkerchiefs to female eyes and makes men move uneasily in their seats" (*Brooklyn Union*). Throughout the tour Brooklyn was variously described as admirable, conscientious, and intelligent. Evidently, she won over American audiences, and her reviews were mostly glowing. However, the season for *Love or Money* was short. In June Bentley was supporting George C. Miln in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *The Fool's Revenge* and May Brooklyn was no longer around. She had returned to Palmer's company and was enamoured with Palmer's business manager, Frederick A. Lovecraft. Bentley's American tour drew to a feeble close. In June 1886, he was on the stage again in Britain. However, Brooklyn stayed and pursued her career and her life in America, replacing Bentley's patronage with Lovecraft's.

Eight years later, when he was touring in Australia, Bentley's relationship with May Brooklyn was in the news again. Brooklyn had committed suicide, a few months after Lovecraft, and in the same manner, by swallowing carbolic acid. While some British obituaries of May Brooklyn reported she was married to Walter Bentley, American press stated that she had married and divorced him. Australian reporters were also confused: one reported Bentley and Brooklyn were divorced (*Australian Star* 6), another that they remained married (*Barrier Miner* 2).

May Brooklyn's association with Bentley resulted in her relocation to America, which created opportunities for her theatrical career as a leading lady. Her relationship with A. M. Palmer's Company was finally crucial in her decision to leave Bentley in 1886. Her last season as leading lady in Palmer's Company was in 1892-93, in the role of Mrs Erlynne, the heroine in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, her major success. She was in the Broadway premiere performance at Palmer's Theatre on 5 February 1893, playing opposite Julia Arthur who had become Palmer's leading lady in his Stock Company from early 1892, possibly dashing Brooklyn's hopes of continuing as leading lady. Although never a "star", nonetheless she had a successful career with Palmer's company. On the other hand, when Bentley lost Brooklyn's support, his career faltered, and he returned alone to Britain, needing to create a new company under his name.

Florence Grant

On his return from America in June 1886, Bentley, still in his thirties, had to create a new company to tour the British provinces. In October he advertised for a leading lady, asking she send a photograph, and state her lowest terms, age, height, and experience (*The Era* 16/10/1886). In Aberdeen, a new leading lady appeared alongside Bentley — Miss Florence Grant (Fig. 3), as Julie in *Richelieu*. Four months



Figure 3. Florence Grant, shown as "Players of the Period. Mrs Walter Bentley". *The Era*, 23 July 1895, p. 11. Photograph taken by J. MacMahon. Inverness.

later, Bentley and Grant married in great secret in the Sheriff's office in Glasgow, witnessed by a Glasgow hotelkeeper. The couple left the Sheriff's locked office by separate doors. Their marriage certificate states Bentley was a bachelor, which he could have been if he was not married to May Brookyn. Journalists were interested in this secret ceremony—reporting from Glasgow (*North British Daily Mail* 4), London (*The Era* 26/2/1887), and New York (*New York Sun*) — an indication of how strange this marriage ceremony was and how Bentley rarely conformed to the usual practices of matrimony.

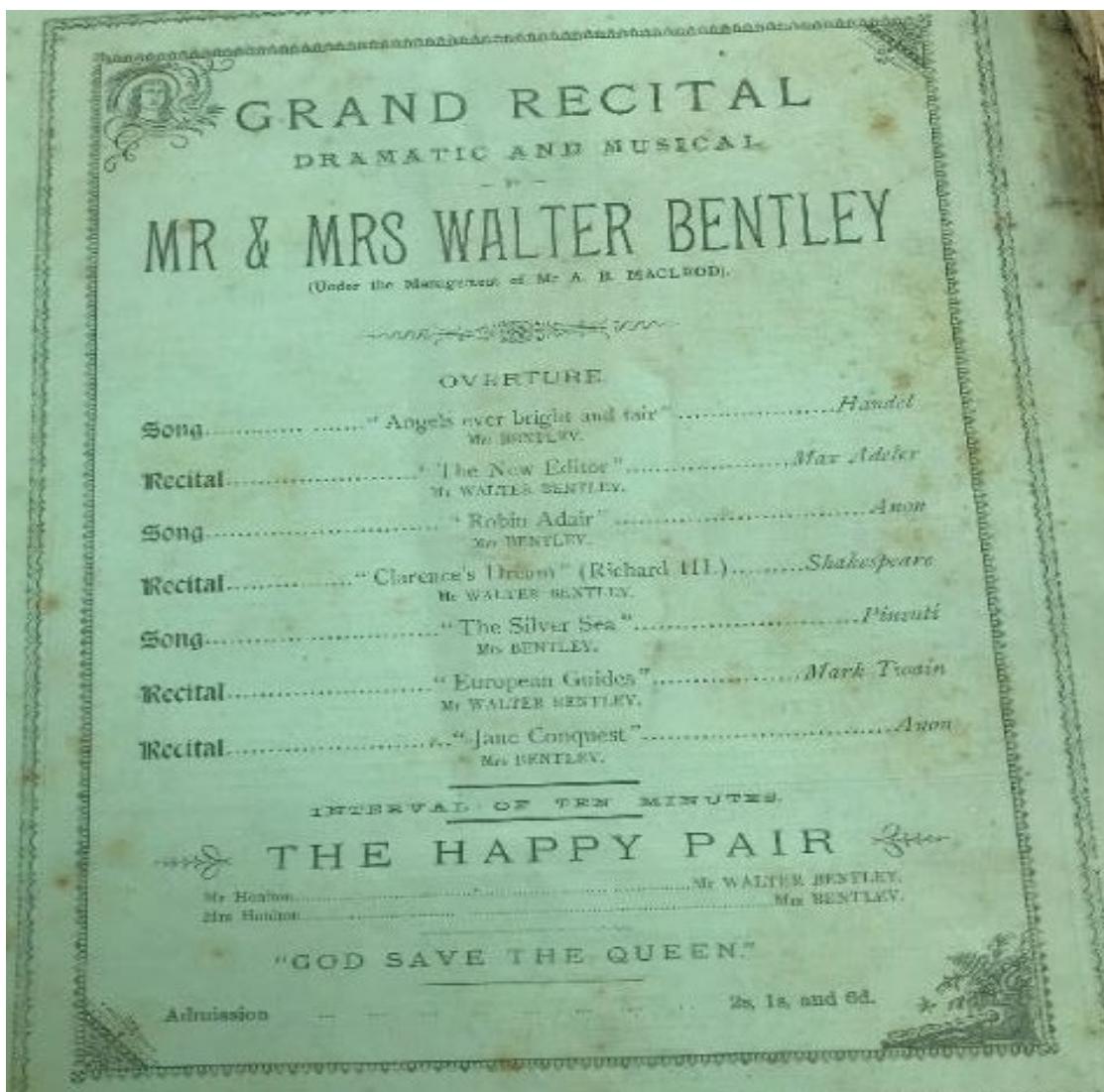


Figure 4. Concert Program by Mr and Mrs Bentley, no date. *The Bentley Papers*, Box 1X, Red Scrapbook, p.179.

Among the clippings in Bentley's scrapbooks, a program for a Grand Recital (Fig. 4) — unfortunately with neither place nor date suggests the couple were in a state of happiness. Bentley's recitals included "Clarence's Dream" from *Richard III*, and Mark Twain's "European Guides", while Grant sang Handel's *Angels Ever Bright and Fair* and recited *Jane Conquest*. Following the interval, the couple performed in a short farce, *The Happy Pair*. Theirs was a short courtship, and the love and security of marriage were to be similarly short.

In an interview in *The Era* in 1895, four years after Bentley had left to tour in Australia, Grant spoke about her life before she joined Bentley's company and briefly about her childhood. Born in Naples to a Spanish father and a Sicilian mother, she studied music as a child but not with the intention of going on the stage, was remarkably adept at learning languages, and could sing in five of them. She later moved to London with her family. In *The Era* interview, it was revealed that she had been previously married but was now a widow and, although she claimed her husband had been a wealthy merchant trading with South Africa, now "widowhood and reverses of fortune [had] altered Miss Grant's whole life" ("We chat with Mrs Walter Bentley"). It was during this vulnerable period that she became engaged to Walter Bentley. Grant had been on the stage since 1884, primarily as an amateur vocalist until she undertook theatrical training. She first appeared as a vocalist at the Albert Hall in 1885, under the name 'Miss Florence Grant', but her preference, however, was towards drama. Grant made her debut at the Vaudeville Theatre, as the eponymous *Camille*, in a matinée performance of that play and, in the same theatre, played Pauline in *The Lady of Lyons*. Then came a tour with Mr Edward Bulwer in a round of the Old English Comedies, followed by an engagement for the part of Kate Medland, in *Queen's Evidence*. Grant's early experiences on the stage in Victorian Britain show the demands of touring with one company after another. Even with Bentley's company in which she toured for four years, she often played seven or eight leading parts during a week. During her interview, Grant gave a rare comment about Bentley's role as stage manager⁴; his training in the Lyceum, she claimed, made him a "rigorous and exacting stage manager," and she appreciated being "under the disciplinary direction of some strong, experienced hand" ("We chat with Mrs Walter Bentley").

Bentley had cycled through two principal leading ladies in his thirties, May Brookyn and Florence Grant. While Bentley continued to work with Grant as he entered his forties, she soon spread her independent wings with the Mrs Walter Bentley Company. With Bentley's departure for Australia in 1891, his juvenile lead, Mr C. B. Keston, transferred to Grant's company, and was to remain with her for six years, first as leading man, and then as "leading gentleman" (*St Andrew's Citizen*). Grant was well esteemed by the members of her company, some of whom stayed with her for considerable periods of time. Audiences flocked to see her, especially in Scotland where Walter Bentley's name was well-known and celebrated, and her performances rarely garnered a bad review.

Now known as a talented young tragedienne, Grant undertook a farewell tour of Scotland, in preparation to joining her husband in Australia. Indeed, Bentley had assured Australian reporters that his wife would soon join him. However, a string of unfortunate accidents and ill-health would prevent this. First, she fell off the stage in a theatre near Glasgow in September 1891, then she was "precipitated" onto the stage when the set collapsed in a theatre in Wales (*South Wales Echo*). In March 1893, she fainted just as she had "played the dying scene of Lady Isabel" (*Edinburgh Evening News* 3). Finally a surfeit of ailments required complete rest and talk of her trip to Australia began to fade. By March 1895, Grant had been touring her company for thirty-three weeks; she briefly rested, and in April was ready for the Spring Tour. It was a relentless schedule. Grant's repertoire was quite different to Bentley's: *Camille*, *Jeanie Deans*, *Woman of the People*,

and *Wages of Sin*, were all plays more suited to a leading actress, managing her own company.

Accidents and ill-health notwithstanding, Grant seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time to follow her husband to Australia. While reporting that she was doing good business with *Joan of Arc* in Hoxton's Britannia Theatre, a critic quoted a Melbourne newspaper which wondered, acerbically, whether she was "the wife of the *one and only tragedian* [my emphasis] who is now rusticating or inebriating at Brisbane. 'Lubricating' is somewhat unkind" ("Notes by Lorgnette"). Some journalists began to question: where was Bentley? Why should London wait any longer? Unbeknown to them, there was in fact no point waiting, as Bentley had already settled in Brisbane with Minnie Brandon. *The Era* suggested "to mention all the parts played by this accomplished lady would be impossible in this space" (*The Era* 23/7/1898). She constantly refreshed her repertoire, keeping English and Scottish audiences interested in her annual visits.

It became perfectly clear that Mr and Mrs Walter Bentley had been leading completely separate lives from when he left for Australia in 1891 to the time of Bentley's return to Britain in 1901. In Britain, the two companies – the Walter Bentley Company and Mrs Walter Bentley Company – toured in similar regions, but with vastly different repertoires. Both were popular. As Grant was touring in Scotland in January 1903, playing *East Lynne* and *The Streets of London* in Dundee's Kinnaird Hall, Bentley was also in Dundee participating in Burns's Anniversary recital (*Dundee Courier*). Perhaps Bentley's philosophy is captured by a clipping in his scrapbook: "It's sometimes easier to live happily with several females outside of your house than one peculiar female in it".⁵ The *New Zealand Times* thought the couple's separation was due to the incompatibility of the tempers of the tragedian and tragedienne (2).

Although successful, Grant's time as actress-manager was drawing to a close, and she increasingly toured with other companies, advertising her interests as "powerful leading and character lead, drama, comedy, or musical comedy" (*The Era* 21/7/1900). She was engaged in various roles: in *The New Magdalen*, a seventeen-week engagement with Miss Manisty's New Magdalen Company (*The Era* 21/7/1900); Mr Herbert Sleath's company, playing Mrs Goodly in *What Happened to Jones?* (*The Era* 6/10/1900); a "First-class London Company" in *The King of Crime* (*Glossop-dale Chronicle*); then *The Octoroon*, taking the title role of Zoe (*Forres Elgin*). In 1904 she acquired the provincial theatre rights to *Three Little Hearts of Gold*, a musical drama by R. L. Cavendish and Stephen E. Blythe, which she proposed to tour after Christmas (*Auckland Star*). In May 1905 she was playing the strenuous role of the Duchess of Rockingham in Manchester, and by December Queen Eleanor, touring provincial England (*Boston Guardian*). In mid-1906 she was in Wales in *The Queen's Vengeance*, and soon after in Northern Ireland playing in *The Eternal City*. She played a strong role in *The Reign of Terror* in Scotland in December 1906, as "an accomplice to Robespierre", demonstrating "that her histrionic powers are far from being a spent force" (*Coatbridge Leader*). Reviews were not as frequent now, nevertheless interest in her career did not wane and in 1907 *The Era* led with a feature article, "Mrs Florence Bentley" (15). Early the following year she was back

in Scotland, playing Helen McGregor in *Rob Roy*, a part that was said to suit her vigorous style (*The Stage* 2/1/1908).

Although Grant's husband may have been absent, she was not estranged from Bentley's family. With Jessie Marie Cargill (the wife of Bentley's brother) and Ferdinand Faithful Begg (a British politician in the late 1890s), Grant campaigned in support of women's suffrage. A decade later, in July 1908, Grant was in a new role in London, chairing the weekly meeting of the Actors' Union where she drew attention to the rights of actresses, particularly with regard to salaries, a continuation of her interest in women's suffrage. While in her early days on the stage Grant may have been under Bentley's control – though this remains speculation – now she was a strong speaker in favour of women's rights, as she brought to light the challenges confronted by actresses to provide sufficient income for their personal and professional needs.

Bentley lasted barely eight years in Britain before, in 1909, he was steaming back towards Australia. Grant's theatrical career continued to flourish independently of her husband. In Scotland, her praises were sung once more—"the well-known Shakespearian actress, whose husband was an Airdrieonian [...] has lost none of her fire [...] and none of her popularity" (*Airdrie and Coatbridge Advertiser*). There was even speculation that Grant wrote *Love That Conquers*, a play that she copyrighted in Britain in 1909 (*Otago Witness*). But from then Grant almost disappears from the record, and reviews are few and far between. She was not, however, entirely forgotten as her name appeared in a long list of actors in a reflection piece in 1917 (*Harrow Observer*). She was mentioned in the obituary of Mr C. B. Keston, who had a long career on stage ending in 1920; Keston had commenced with Bentley's company, then transferred to Grant's with whom he performed many seasons (*The Stage* 21/4/1927).

Grant was admitted to a London cancer hospital in 1920; she died in London in 1928, a year after Bentley. She never criticised Bentley publicly – nor for that matter did Bentley criticise her. Grant was able to capitalise on Bentley's name as it was well-known in the British provinces. Additionally, she was clearly a strong, independent woman, able to craft her own life and at times acting as an agent of change, publicly speaking about the precariousness of life for actresses in the long-nineteenth century. Despite using Bentley's name to promote her touring company and the bulk of her career in the United Kingdom, Grant was a successful actor-manager in her own right, and I restore her under her own name in the spirit of the feminist revisionist historiographical project I attribute to Newey, Davis, Woollard *et al* throughout this article.

Minnie Brandon

Bentley left Britain at the invitation of George Coppin in 1891, travelling to Melbourne with Danish actress Laura Hansen, leaving Florence Bentley (née Grant) his wife of four years in Britain. Then two years later, in his forties, he had a new, young, leading lady, nineteen-year-old Minnie Brandon (Fig. 5).



An Australian Actress.

MISS MINNIE BRANDON.

Miss Minnie Brandon is a native of Victoria, and is still one year on the happy side of 21. She made her debut at the age of 18 with Miss Barlow's dramatic company at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, and since then her success has been remarkable. She has played throughout the whole of Australia and New Zealand, and her efforts have always been received with marked interest and appreciation by the public. Miss Brandon has just returned to Sydney after a seven months' successful tour of New Zealand with Walter Bentley's company. She has sometimes played juvenile lead, but more frequently in the principal comedy parts. Mr. Bentley speaks in eulogistic terms of Miss Brandon, who is a very versatile and accomplished young actress, and should before long establish a name for herself other than on the Australian stage.

Figure 5. "An Australian Actress. Miss Minnie Brandon".
Australian Town and Country Journal, Sydney, 16 March 1895, supplement, p. 2.

Born in Victoria around 1875, Minnie Brandon is an undiscovered Australian actress ("An Australian Actress"). She was first mentioned performing in Bentley's company in Tasmania in June 1894; Bentley spoke about her in superlative terms, predicting she would have a career well beyond the Australian stage, but that was not to be. Bentley's company headed to Dunedin, for a year-long tour, but after seven months as juvenile lead, Brandon quit the company and returned to Sydney. She was not amongst the members of the dramatic company who, according to Auckland's *Observer*, sued the "greatest living actor for salary due". With sly innuendo the paper suggested "What? Surely the charming 'niece of the manager' had a claim. But perhaps it was settled privately?" (16/2/1895). Remaining in New Zealand on a lecture tour, Bentley needed a vocalist. He sought the one cast member who had not sued him, and Brandon reappeared in his life, but their tour was not successful. Bentley headed to Brisbane and sent for Brandon. The couple took the *Passion Play* through Queensland and occasionally they presented a farce, including *Is Marriage a Failure?* Brandon's relationship with Bentley drew suspicious comments—"vocalist, eh?" asked Sydney's *Sunday Times*⁶ — suggesting their personal relationship, outside the sanction of marriage, was an open secret.

Settling in Jane Street, now in Brisbane's West End, Bentley taught elocution at Brisbane School of Arts and staged amateur productions. While his own career remained in the public eye due to a charm offensive he mounted with the political and social elite

of Brisbane, there is no record of Brandon attending social events with him. She was of a certain private value to Bentley, but apparently not to his public life. Occasionally comments from across the Tasman filtered through: "Miss Minnie Brandon is still with him" said the *New Zealand Mail* (23/8/1895). Minnie often received favourable reviews. In *The Silence of Dean Maitland*, she was "appropriately subdued though earnest and loving in tone and manner and was, therefore, a decided success" (*Punch* 2/8/1894 7), while the following year her singing was said to be "highly eulogised by the press" as she accompanied Bentley's lectures ("Evening Entertainments" 5).

Forming a company again and taking a two-month lease on the Theatre Royal, and opening with *The Bells*, *Rob Roy* and *Othello*, Bentley programmed Brandon by his side as a juvenile and occasionally leading lady. Her performance in *Hamlet* provoked a criticism for having "little aptitude [for Ophelia] ... a heavy task for her" (*Brisbane Courier Mail* 2/10/1895 4), although she "acceptably" filled a "small part" in *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (*Brisbane Courier Mail* 18/9/1895 4). Bentley's season failed, and he announced his retirement from the stage. This of course impacted Brandon as Bentley was her theatrical patron.

In September 1896, Bentley was bankrupt, and Brandon had left Brisbane. She was reported to be "making rapid strides in her profession as leading lady in *Fallen Among Thieves* in the Lyceum Theatre in Sydney with her "graceful rendition of the role", earning her a "flattering reception" ("Miss Minnie Brandon" 4). She played in *The Ticket of Leave Man*, winning applause for her "natural and graceful acting" (Sunday Times 25/3/1897 2). Her repertoire was entirely different to Bentley's and included *Fallen Among Thieves* at the Lyceum where Brandon, although leading lady, was criticised for not properly gauging the acoustics (Sydney Morning Herald 25/10/1897 3). In *Two Little Vagabonds*, in Her Majesty's, she was said to be "an attractive heroine but lacked power in some scenes" (Sunday Star Times 24/10/1897 2), although she was praised as "intelligent" (Evening News 25/10/1897 3), and said to have had the benefit of "excellent training" (Truth 31/10/1897 2). Her "advancement under Walter Bentley [suggests that she] promises to become an Australian star" (Truth 12/10/1897 2). Brandon continued her peripatetic career in the touring circuits, from Sydney to Melbourne, then with George Ward's company, touring Queensland (Referee 1/2/1899 10). In Charters Towers there was anticipation for opening with *The Danger Signal*: Brandon and Mr Herbert Linden (of the Herbert Linden Company) were, they said, such old favourites (The Northern Miner). Soon the Herbert Linden Company with Brandon as leading lady, was heading to Bathurst. In 1900 Minnie was in Sydney with George Rignold at the Criterion Theatre, playing Suzette in *Dreyfus*, a play penned by George Rignold and Walter Bentley. Bentley was back in her life. Brandon was described in reviews as his "glash" [meaning "sex object"] and was doing her best to bolster the reception of *Dreyfus*, bringing in four groups of "gallery girls", seating them in the circle in different parts, so that applause was well distributed. They all looked like "neat young generals. ... No wonder the papers said there was a crowded house" (Clarence and Richmond Examiner 4).

Next Bentley and Brandon were back on stage together, in a company managed by Douglas Ancelon. Minnie was Walter's leading lady in a number of plays. The two actors toured from Sydney to Newcastle with *David Garrick*, *The Bells*, *Hamlet*, and *The Silver King*; between melodramas and farces they delivered patriotic recitals, as they collected funds for the Australian contingent fighting in the Boer War. Brandon's reviews were again mixed, the most vicious for her role as Ophelia when the duo performed in Tasmania later the same year: "Walter Bentley has scored with *Hamlet* in Tasmania but I can't fancy the metallic and inexperienced—as far as big parts are concerned—Minnie Brandon as Ophelia" (The Elector 4). Nevertheless, she did win plaudits, being described otherwise very favourably in Hobart as "a distinct success ... displaying a large amount of emotional ability, which would have done any actress credit and her sympathetic bearing naturally appealed to the sentiments of the audience" (Tasmanian News 2). In April 1900, Bentley took *The Silver King* to the Princess Theatre in Dunedin. Ada Woodhill was his leading lady. Brandon was relegated to a minor role.

There is no record of Brandon for the remainder of 1900 until 27 December when, in St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, she married a wealthy Frenchman: George Snell La Cloche Ward, from St Saviour's Jersey. On 15 June 1901, she opened with Herbert Cato in a double bill of *Nurse* and *Old Chelsea* at Sydney's Royal Theatre. She then joined 'Maynard's Company', which gave way to 'Halloway's', and Brandon found herself playing

at Hobart's Palace in *The Milestones of Life* and *In the Soup* (*The Mercury* 5). Next it was the 'Taylor Carrington Company' and Brandon was performing in Adelaide (*The Advertiser* 31/7/1901 8). Appearing at the Theatre Royal in *Is She Guiltless*, Brandon played with "requisite and appropriate pathos which won the sympathy of the audience" (*The Advertiser* 15/8/1901 6). Playing Mary Brady in *Ould Ireland* later in the month, she was "pleasing" (*The Advertiser* 19/8/1901 7). From Adelaide, Brandon was in Broken Hill, then Bendigo and Geelong. Reports said she was to be Bentley's leading lady again and would join him in New York for *The Gypsy King* (*The Newsletter*). But that train had definitely left the station: Bentley was already back in Britain. There was nothing for it but to abandon the idea of travel to New York—if in fact it had ever existed.

Brandon started her own company—the Percy Lawson-Minnie Brandon Comedy Company. A few new pieces were in their repertoire — *Dr Bill*, *Our Flat* and *Confusion*. Their tour through New South Wales and Queensland in 1903 seemed to spell the end of the company and Minnie Brandon's acting career, as there are no archival references to it touring beyond this year. She was in her mid-thirties. And that was it. There was no revival of her career and no death notices. Minnie Brandon's time in the limelight—with and without Bentley—was spent. While not enjoying the international success of Brooklyn and Grant – Brandon's career was restricted to Australasia – and mixed reviews cited throughout her career notwithstanding, she was clearly assiduous enough to pursue professional partnerships beyond Bentley and constitutes another female actor-manager whose career has slipped through the historiographical cracks until now.

Melba Watt



Figure 6. "Miss Melba Mildred Watt", 1921. Program, *Shakespeare Tercentenary Memorial Fund, New South Wales, Her Majesty's Theatre, 20 September 1921*.

In 1909 Bentley announced he was leaving Britain and migrating to Australia for the sake of his health. Harold Love points to the decades preceding Bentley's return, and the "new breed of permanently resident stars whose first commitment was to Australian, rather than overseas, theatre" (57). Although Veronica Kelly argues pre-war Australian society did not afford the "wider sphere of artistic and career possibilities [of] London" (41), nevertheless, Bentley returned, brimming with confidence and settling in Sydney. Immediately, he established his college of elocution and began training pupils for their monthly costume recitals in St James's Hall, King Street, Sydney. From its establishment in 1910, Bentley's "dramatic club" attracted hundreds of pupils, predominantly young women. One of his students was Melba Mildred Watt.

At first glance, Melba Watt (Fig. 6) was an unlikely student of dramatic art. She and her twin brother, Oscar Harold McClure Watt, born in 1892, were the eleventh and twelfth children in their family. Although they lived in Braidwood, a

rural town in New South Wales, their parents had a property Wyanbene, fifty kilometres from town. While still a teenager, by 1908 Melba Watt had moved to Sydney with her sisters, settling in Bronte. Their father, however, thought that his daughters should not work, while pursuits, like acting, seemed acceptable. A professional life on stage was not unknown to the Watt family. Melba Watt's sister, Mrs Emma Murdoch, was a concert pianist and toured America for ten years, later returning to Sydney where she taught singing. But for both Melba and Emma it was a far cry from their rural upbringing in Braidwood and the training they had in secretarial skills, in the expectation that job opportunities might open for them.





Figure 7. "The Stage at the Seaside", *The Sun*, Sydney, 10 March 1911, p. 12.

Nineteen-year-old Watt joined Bentley's college in 1911. A member of the Bronte Women's Life-Saving Club, it is entirely possible that she was one of Bentley's "stage ladies" enjoying the beach in late summer 1911 (Fig. 7), creating great publicity for Bentley's endeavours. One journalist suggested "the average chorus girl would not be seen in public in a bathing costume" ("The Stage at the Seaside" 12). Mixing with his young students was like a youthful elixir for "the old and popular actor", said Sydney's *Evening News*; "few were prepared to find Mr Bentley so youthful!" (*Evening News* 22/3/1910 2).

Bentley's elocution college attracted many young ladies, so when a question came up about unmarried young women, Bentley's response ran under a large headline: *THE PROBLEM OF UNMARRIED DAUGHTERS*, proclaiming his college provided young women with independence, concluding: "As Shakespeare says, "It is in ourselves that we are thus, or thus", therefore, the moral side of the question can be safely left to the individual, with a perfect knowledge that the discipline of the theatre will, in 99 cases out of 100, make for good" (*Sunday Times* 5/5/1912 24).

Melba Watt was one of the unmarried daughters in his classes in 1911. In 1912 her name was mentioned as one of the Walter Bentley Players in *Popping the Question*, in which she had a supporting role (*Sydney Morning Herald* 21/10/1912 3). Little did she know that, in the future, Bentley was indeed to pop the question. She was noticed in May 1913 in a very positive review for her "admirable Lady Isabel" in *East Lynne* ("Costume Dramatic Recital" 8), "the feature of the evening" according to another critic (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16/5/1913 10). And again in 1914 as Pauline in *Lady of Lyons* (*Sydney Morning Herald* 18/3/1914 16), then as the Queen in a short piece in which Bentley played Charles I, a performance to raise funds for the Red Cross (*Sydney Morning Herald* 18/9/1914 10). Watt then disappeared from notice over a period of three years. She was involved in the local war movement because her twin brother, Oscar, was a member of



Figure 8. Melba Watt and her twin brother Oscar, before his departure with the 18th Infantry Battalion, April/May 1915. Photograph by Sidney Riley Studios, Pitt Street, Sydney. Private Collection.



Figure 9. Willma (Billie) Eileen Bentley, 1919. Private Collection.

the 18th Australian Infantry Battalion (Fig. 8). Five months after leaving Sydney Oscar landed at Gallipoli on 22 August 1915, aged just 23. Five days later, he was dead, two days before the ANZAC troops pulled out of the peninsula.

In spite of the war, and her brother's death, Watt kept in touch with Bentley. In March 1917, at a meeting of the Actors' Association of Australasia, which Bentley and George Titheradge had founded in 1912, Melbourne's *Punch* said that the reception in honour of Mr Hugh Ward, a director of J. C. Williamson Ltd, was presided over by Mr and Mrs Walter Bentley (*Punch* 8/3/1917 31). Her relationship with Bentley had clearly moved ahead over the three silent years. We next hear of Watt's theatrical career in 1921, but a lot had happened to her in the interim. In 1917 she was pregnant, and it seems she returned to the family home, in Beecroft. Her daughter, Willma Eileen, known as Billie (Fig. 9), was born on 5 February 1918.

The following month – on 19 March 1918 – Melba Watt quietly married Walter Bentley in the Methodist Church, Elisabeth Street, Sydney. Watt was 25 – not 24 as stated on the marriage certificate – her occupation: home duties. Bentley, a teacher of elocution, was 68. The marriage certificate states that Bentley was a widower. However, Florence Grant, the previous Mrs Walter Bentley, was not deceased and there is no evidence that I can find that she had divorced Bentley.



Figure 10. The Bentley family, Sydney, 1920. Photograph by May Moore Studio. Private Collection.

Between motherhood and her duties teaching in Bentley's College of Vocal Culture, Watt had largely forsaken the stage (Fig. 10), though life in the Bentley family revolved around the theatre. Charity events saw Melba occasionally take to the stage in 1921 as Jessica in a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in Her Majesty's Theatre for the Shakespeare Tercentenary Fund. Bentley was Shylock and Mrs T. H. Kelly played Portia. We can suppose that Billie Bentley was resting in a dressing room during the performance, as a photo of the curtain-call shows her taking it with her parents (Fig. 11).

The family had moved into "Cromer", a rented flat at 91 Phillip Street, Sydney. Bentley's College of Voice Culture was morphing into a business to cure stammering. Advertisements from 1922 announce his wife's role as assistant teacher ("College of Vocal Culture" 17). Watt began to stretch her wings,



Figure 11. *The Merchant of Venice*. Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, 20 September 1921. Private Collection.

spreading the reach of the college beyond Phillip Street, to Kogarah and Wentworthville, at one shilling per lesson (*St George Call*). As Bentley's health was now quite troubling, he was producing the recitals in partnership with Harry Thomas, one of his former pupils, and Miss Kathleen Leonard, one of his current pupils (*Daily Telegraph* 23/5/1925 21). Watt was under Thomas's tuition and in 1925 appeared with him in *Romeo and Juliet*, playing Juliet to Thomas's Romeo (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1/6/1925 6).

Figure 12. "Walter Bentley: An Actor's Life-work". *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 20 August 1927, p. 22.

Walter Bentley's death was the penultimate occasion for Florence Bentley's [Grant's] name to be linked with his. There was considerable confusion for reporters as there were two Mrs Walter Bentleys, one in Britain and one in Australia. Some reports did mention Mrs Bentley – that she had produced the play *Romance Love* written by Major Steven, that was Mrs Florence Bentley [Grant] – and that as she left the apartment the morning Bentley died, he told her he felt brighter, but that conversation was with Mrs Melba Bentley [Watt].⁷ Reporters didn't investigate the contradictions – possibly because they had not heard of Mrs Florence Bentley for so long, they presumed she had already died.

Addendum: 1928–49

Within three months of Bentley's death, Watt got down to business, advertising elocution classes (Fig. 13) and Bentley's techniques for curing stammering (*Smith's Weekly* 6). She ran the business for eight years, and returned occasionally to the stage, in costume

Walter Bentley spent the last six months of his life bedridden. Finally, in a long interview in 1927, he acknowledged his wife's role in the college, saying "If you want to know all about it, ask her!" ("Walter Bentley: An Actor's Life-Work" 22) (see: Fig. 12). One month later Bentley committed suicide. His death was reported across Australia, and in New Zealand, Britain, and America. While some reports of his death mentioned his wife and child, not all did. His death certificate records that there was a first marriage, with no issue, but fails to mention Florence Grant's name. Watt, her mother, four sisters, and her nine-year-old daughter, attended Rookwood Crematorium, with other mourners, farewelling Walter Bentley. In contrast to his Methodist wedding, a Presbyterian minister officiated at the burial. Melba Watt had been married to Bentley for nine years. It was his longest relationship.

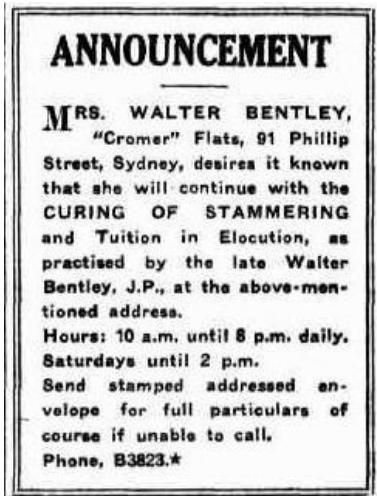


Figure 13. *Smith's Weekly*, Sydney, 17 December 1927, p. 6.

recitals under Harry Thomas (*Daily Telegraph* 23/5/1925 21). In 1928 Watt was back on stage with Harry Thomas, at St James's Hall, playing in Thomas's adaptation of Dickens's *David Copperfield*. She was one of the principals, who "realised the fiery cruelty of Rosa Dartle" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 25/6/1928 7). Performances ran every evening of the following week. The final advertisement for the Walter Bentley College of Voice Culture was on 17 April 1935 (*The World's News* 37), after which, presumably, Watt closed the business.

Melba Bentley [Watt] was a widow for 22 years. At the time of her sudden and unexpected death on 18 September 1949, aged 56 — not 52 as stated on the death certificate — she was working as a matron at Presbyterian Ladies College, Orange, New South Wales. Her death did not invoke memories of Walter Bentley.

His time in the sun had passed. Melba Bentley's funeral service was conducted by a Presbyterian minister and her ashes interred in the columbarium in the east chapel at Rookwood Cemetery, in a casket beneath Bentley's. The plaque on her casket reads: "Melba Mildred Bentley/Widow of Walter Bentley/Dearly Loved Mother of Billie/Died 18th September 1949" (Fig. 14). Melba carried Bentley's name to her grave.



Figure 14. Caskets for Walter Bentley and Melba Mildred Bentley, Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney, 4 February 2021. Photograph by author.

Conclusion

Theatre history has tended to focus on the lives of celebrated actors and actresses. However, as Jim Davis and Tracy Davis have contended, to completely understand how the theatre worked in nineteenth century Britain—and in Australia—the absent lives of “ordinary” actresses must be discovered (107-37). Indeed, as Katherine Newey suggested, such discoveries reveal actresses’ relationships to patriarchal power, and are an “ethical imperative for feminist history” (88) revealing, as I hope to have done in this chapter, the agency and sustainability of women’s theatre careers beyond the men – frequently, in the case of the four women investigated here, husbands – to whose names they are oftentimes attached.

These recuperative histories of four actresses – May Brookyn, Florence Grant, Minnie Brandon, and Melba Watt – show their tenacity and endurance despite the economic precarity of their careers, tied to a leading man, emotionally, professionally, and financially. May Brookyn’s career demonstrated the challenges of touring the British provinces, the importance of her introduction to American audiences and, after Bentley, her long-term successes with A. M. Palmer’s Company. Through Florence Grant’s interview we have an idea of the intensive training for an actress to set foot on the Victorian British stage learn of how she took control of her destiny as an actress-manager. On Australian soil, Minnie Brandon struggled without the patronage of Walter Bentley, working for a string of second-tier touring companies, while Melba Watt’s ambitions for the stage were curtailed by family and business responsibilities – and yet she successfully ran the family elocution business for decades before and after his death, during the 1920s and 1930s when stage employment opportunities were diminishing due to the rise of film and economic opportunity was broadly curtailed by the Great Depression.

The plaque on Bentley’s casket reads: “After Life’s Fitful Fever He Sleeps Well”, a quote from *Macbeth*:

Better be with the dead
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Thank on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave:
After life’s fitful fever he sleeps well. (Act III, Scene 2)

Bentley had left his women and was finally at rest. Yet by questioning *his* archive and searching other online archives for his absent leading ladies, these absent actresses can rise again, taking their place alongside, and at times ahead of, their leading man.

Editor's Note

As Sue-Anne Wallace passed away between the submission and publication of this article, the editors have endeavoured to present her work as faithfully as possible, preserving her original text aside from the correction of typographical errors. Unfortunately, certain archival details remain beyond our reach, as they passed with her. Where possible, revisions that Sue-Anne herself might have made have been thoughtfully undertaken by those closely involved with her and her project. We extend particular thanks to Glen McGillivray and Stephen Carleton for their assistance in revising this manuscript.

Notes

- ¹ Contract for *Burr Oaks*, 7 July 1884. *The Bentley Papers*, Box 1X, Red Scrapbook, p. 111.
- ² *The Monitor*, November 1884 in *The Bentley Papers*, Box 1x, Red Scrapbook, p. 83.
- ³ Reference unknown.
- ⁴ In this capacity, a stage manager is akin to our modern understanding of the role of the director.
- ⁵ *The Bentley Papers*, Box 1X, Red Scrapbook, p. 172.
- ⁶ *Sunday Times*, Sydney, qtd. in *Observer*, Auckland, 13 July 1895. p. 9.
- ⁷ Report unknown.

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