

Ada Bloxham, Vocalist and Tonic Sol-fa-ist—A nineteenth century  
Australian musician at the forefront of musical achievement

Robin Stevens  
Principal Fellow  
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music  
The University of Melbourne

The Australian mezzo-soprano Ada Beatrice Bloxham (1865–1956) had the distinction of achieving three firsts in the world of music—she was the inaugural winner of the Clarke Scholarship to Royal College of Music in London, she was the first Australian to enrol at the Royal College of Music and to graduate as an Associate of the College (A.R.C.M.), and she was the first woman to be awarded a Fellowship of the Tonic Sol-fa College, London (F.T.S.C.). Ada was the only daughter of an early pastoralist in the Bourke region of New South Wales, Edward Bloxham, and his wife Mary, who was later the Matron of the Girls' Reformatory School in Coburg, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. Ada was born in the suburb of Jolimont and, until her departure for overseas, lived with her mother at Coburg.

Ada Bloxham showed early promise as a vocalist and although she achieved distinction as a performer and a music teacher, both in Australia and overseas, her career was curtailed—as was frequently the case during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century—by being a married woman with a family of two daughters. Her early musical potential was not as fully realised as it could have been had her circumstances been different. Nevertheless, during her twenties and thirties, her achievements put her at the forefront of female emancipation in the musical arts and in music education.

## Background

### *The Clarke Scholarship*

Also known as the South Province (Victoria) Scholarship of the Royal College of Music, the Clarke Scholarship was established by Sir William John Clarke (1831–1897), a Victorian landowner, stud-breeder and philanthropist. Clark, with his wife Janet Marion Clarke (1851–1909), undertook several visits to England and during one of these (in 1882) decided to establish the Sir W. J. Clarke Music Scholarship valued at 3,000 guineas to enable a Victorian musician to study at the Royal College of Music.<sup>1</sup> Notable recipients of the Clarke Scholarship have included pianist William Murdoch (1906), violinist (later conductor) Bernard Heinze (1913), organist William McKie (1919), pianist Roy Shepherd (1925) and clarinetist Isobel Carter (1928), organist John Nicholls (1935) and composer Noel Nicholson (1939).<sup>2</sup> A later generation of Clarke scholarship holders included pianist Judith Lambden, pianist Sally Mays, pianist Glenn Riddle (1987), harpist Marshall McGuire (1992), pianist Louisa Breen (1998) and mezzo-soprano Alexandra Sherman. The Clarke Scholarship, which is the oldest travelling scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> S. Morrissey, 'Clarke, Sir William John (1831-1897)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online*, viewed on 2 April 2014, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/clarke-sir-william-john-3229>

<sup>2</sup> W. A. Orchard, *Music in Australia: More than 150 Years of Development*. Georgian House Pty Ltd, 1952, p. 166.

in music in Australia, continues to the present day through a trust established at the University of Melbourne by Clarke's grandson, Sir Rupert Clarke, in 1996.<sup>3</sup>

As the first holder of the Clarke Scholarship, Ada Bloxham was able to demonstrate the value of overseas training at what was then the premier institution for music training in the British Empire.

### *The Tonic Sol-fa Method*

The teaching of music literacy is an age-old problem. The first music educator to address this issue was the eleventh century Benedictine monk, Guido d'Arezzo (995–1050), also known as Guido Monaco. He discovered that his choristers were able to remember the pitch the notes of what we now know as the major scale by referring back to the initial syllables of the first six musical phrases of a hymn, *Ut qua lexus*—the Hymn to St John—each of which began on a successively higher note of the scale. This system was formalised into what was known as the Gamut, which became a visual representation of pitch. Guido d'Arezzo is also credited with the invention of the Guidonian hand, a widely used mnemonic system in which note names are mapped to parts of the human hand. Several centuries of development based on Guidonian principles followed in Continental Europe, eventually resulting in the predominance of the fixed doh method of teaching singing. In England, however, attempts to introduce the fixed doh system achieved only limited success.

In 1841, the Rev. John Curwen (1816–1880), a young Methodist minister, was commissioned by a conference of Sunday School teachers to recommend 'some simple method to the churches which should enable all to sing with ease and propriety'. There was a social reason for this directive. As a result of the industrial revolution, most factory workers lived miserable existences, often with only one day's rest per week which was intended for church attendance. The notion of singing in church and community settings was felt to be a wholesome activity—an antidote to moral decadence.<sup>4</sup> The sol-fa system appealed for its relatively easy access to music notation, even for the poorly educated worker. After extensive investigations, Curwen drew on several English and Continental sources including Sarah Ann Glover's Norwich Sol-fa system to develop his own Tonic Sol-fa system.

Sarah Glover, the eldest daughter of the rector of St Lawrence Church in Norwich, had developed a method of teaching singing which she published in a book entitled *Scheme to Render Psalmody Congregational*.<sup>5</sup> Glover utilised a movable doh system in which the first letters in uppercase of each of the sol-fa syllables became symbols for what she called 'supplementary notation' which she used as a mnemonic aid for reading from the staff. She also made use of a system of bar lines and punctuation marks to denote the rhythm in her system of supplementary notation. She deliberately postponed the use of staff notation until the supplementary notation had been fully mastered. She also developed a visual representation of pitch as a means of drilling her pupils by 'sol-fa-ing' tunes pointed out note-by-note on the Sol-fa Ladder.

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<sup>3</sup> Bebbington, W. (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Music*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive overview of this aspect of Tonic Sol-fa, see Maguire, C. E., *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-fa Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Glover, S., *Scheme to Render Psalmody Congregational*. Norwich & London: Hamilton and Jarrold, 1835.

John Curwen, having observed her work in Norwich, ‘borrowed’—some would say ‘plagiarised’—and adapted several of her pedagogical techniques. But he also introduced several new features to his Tonic Sol-fa method and its system of letter notation. Curwen set out his method in several editions of a textbook entitled *The Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching Music*,<sup>6</sup> first published in 1848. The motto of the Tonic Sol-fa movement—*Easy, Cheap and True*—was adopted by Curwen during the 1860s. The motto aptly describes, first, the relative ease of teaching music literacy compared with other contemporary approaches. Second, it was less expensive to print, as standard printing characters conveniently could be used, instead of the special characters and processes required for staff notation.

Finally, Curwen also utilised the movable-doh system, which was ‘true’ in both a theoretical and a practical sense. The seven tones of the major scale could also be applied to the relative minor scale by starting and ending the scale on *lah*. Modulation to related keys was effected by means of ‘bridge-tones’. Curwen ‘borrowed’ Glover’s *Norwich Sol-fa Ladder* which he adapted into *The Tonic Sol-fa Modulator*. Curwen also devised the sol-fa hand-signs which became part of the method in 1870. For teaching rhythm, Curwen adopted the system of French time names (which he incorporated into Tonic Sol-fa in 1867 from a model by Chev ). He also devised a rather complex system of finger-signs for rhythm. By 1872 Curwen had taken the decisive step of breaking away entirely from staff notation so that Tonic Sol-fa notation became a notational system in its own right. Part of the reason for this was Curwen’s belief that his notation was sufficiently comprehensive that it could provide for all aspects of musical representation.

Pitch was notated using the first letters of the solmisation syllables together with vertical dashes above or below notes to indicate octave placement. Rhythmic notation consisted of vertical ‘bar’ lines and other punctuation marks—the colon, comma, etc—for divisions of the beat. Rests were notated by a blank space preceded by a punctuation mark.

The growth of Tonic Sol-fa as a music teaching method and notation system for school and community choral singing and also as a social movement in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century was phenomenal. Tonic Sol-fa became the mainstay of congregational singing, not only in Methodist churches, but also in churches of other denominations. The method was also widely employed by temperance workers and other social reformers. From modest beginnings and an estimated 2,000 Tonic Sol-fa-ists in 1853, the movement was able to claim 315,000 followers by 1872, and then to spread throughout Britain to its colonies and to many other countries.<sup>7</sup>

In order to propagate the Tonic Sol-fa method, Curwen established the Tonic Sol-fa Agency, then the Tonic Sol-fa Press in 1863, which later became the music publishers J. Curwen and Sons. Curwen also published a monthly journal entitled *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, later *The Musical Herald*, which was subscribed to by readers from all over the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Curwen, J., *The Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching Music*. London: Curwen and Sons, 1858.

<sup>7</sup> Curwen, J. S. and Graham, J., *The Tonic Sol-fa Jubilee: A Popular Record and Handbook*. London: J. Curwen and Sons, c. 1891.

### *The Tonic Sol-fa College and its music examinations system*

In order to provide motivation for learning Tonic Sol-fa as well as an ordered course of study, Curwen established a Certificate of Proficiency in 1852. Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced Certificates were established in 1859 and a training institution, called the Tonic Sol-fa School was established in 1864 with the objective of training Tonic Sol-fa teachers. Meanwhile, Curwen published several textbooks to support the teaching of Tonic Sol-fa including a textbook entitled *The Standard Course of Lessons and Exercises in the Tonic Sol-fa Method of Teaching Music*, first published in 1858.

At a meeting of Tonic Sol-fa-ists on 1 January 1869, Curwen proposed the establishment of a Tonic Sol-fa College. The College was formally incorporated on 19 June 1875. Plans for a permanent home for the Tonic Sol-fa College were drawn up and a site chosen in west London at Earham Grove, Forest Gate, East Ham. Council of elected members representing a range of prescribed occupations was responsible for its administration. The Foundation Stone for the Tonic Sol-fa College was laid by Curwen on 14 May 1879 and in July, a wing of the completed building was opened by the Eighth Earl of Kintore on 4 July 1879 and accepted the first students for the annual summer school which was to be held there for many years. The Tonic Sol-fa College moved to 27 Finbury Square in London in October 1890, and later, in 1939, to Great Ormond Street, and then in 1944 to Queensborough Terrace.

The Tonic Sol-fa College conducted a wide range of educational activities including singing classes, postal courses and summer term courses and also administered a system of graded public music examinations that included Junior, Elementary, Intermediate, Matriculation and Advanced Certificates as well as the School Teacher's Music Certificate. In addition, the College awarded Associate, Licentiate, Graduate and Fellowship diplomas by prescribed examinations. Unlike most other music examining bodies at the time, the examination of candidates for Tonic Sol-fa certificates was undertaken by teachers—often their own—who had been proposed in “The Tonic Sol-fa College” columns of *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, later *The Musical Herald*, and if no objections were received, they were duly put to a committee for confirmation as examiners. Overseas Tonic Sol-fa-ists as well as those from Britain were appointed as examiners and the College was represented in local communities by District Councils through whom examination entries could be submitted.

The highest qualification offered by the Tonic Sol-fa College was the Fellowship diploma which required the candidate to have passed the Advanced Certificate, Branch II (Music Composition) together with two other branches (Vocal Music, Solo Singing, Orchestration, Piano, Harmonium or Organ), together with the Advanced Theory Certificate. The latter certificate included examinations in English composition and elocution, acoustics, and music history and literature.<sup>8</sup> In addition to her other Tonic Sol-fa College certifications and her Associateship of the Royal College of Music, Ada Bloxham achieved the distinction of being a Fellow of the Tonic Sol-fa College.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fisher, H., *The Music Profession*. London: J. Curwen and Sons, pp.249-254.

<sup>9</sup> *The Musical Herald* (London: J. Curwen & Sons), 1 May 1889, p.104.

## Bloxham's Early Career and Musical Achievements

Ada's father was Edward John Bloxham who was born 10 June 1822 at Bradsey in Worcestershire, England and who died on 6 October 1893 at Bourke in New South Wales. Edward, with his brother Arthur, had taken up land in the Bourke area and at one time had pastoral interests covering a total of 3.25 million acres. Edward Bloxham married Mary Frances Kenny (1829–1911) about 1850 at Deniliquin in Victoria, later moving to Bourke in New South Wales where he acquired his two pastoral properties, “Duplop” and “Toorale”. He then shifted to Melbourne where he held land in the Sunbury, Mount Misery and Keilor Plains Estates.<sup>10</sup> Ada, their only child, was born on 13 July 1865 at Jolimont in East Melbourne. Four years later, after what appears to have been a separation from her husband, Mary Bloxham gained appointment as Matron of the Girls' Reformatory School in Coburg, a position that she held for twenty-three years from 1869 until her retirement in 1892.

Ada learnt piano, harmony, “ear cultivation” and sight singing using the Tonic Sol-fa system from a local teacher, Emily Patton(1831–1912),<sup>11</sup> as well as attending classes in advanced theory of music and composition taught by Samuel McBurney (1847–1909),<sup>12</sup> then Principal of Geelong Ladies College and President of the Victorian Tonic Sol-fa Association. Ada later received one term of tuition from H. C. Jerrard (R.A.M.) prior to auditioning for the inaugural Clarke Scholarship which she won in 1883 at the age of seventeen and a half.<sup>13</sup>

Ada, a mezzo-soprano, was one of eighty-six applicants—forty-seven pianists, twenty-six vocalists, seven violinists and six organists.<sup>14</sup> The first auditions were held on 1 February 1883 with sixteen of the candidates—seven pianists, two vocalists, four violinists and one organist—going through to the final adjudication before a board of examiners that included Dr George Torrance, Max Vogrich and Alfred Plumpton. Aside from being auditioned in their particular instrumental or vocal area, each candidate was examined in musical grammar, harmony, “correctness of ear”, etc. It was considered that none of candidates had reached an appropriate standard, but although Ada was considered to have weak vocal quality, she was nevertheless singled out as possessing sufficient general ability in theoretical knowledge and piano playing that she warranted the award of the scholarship. This is well illustrated in the following newspaper report:

Miss Bloxham's youth, and the extremely short time she was under Mr. Jerrard's tuition, prevented her from doing full justice to that gentleman's well-known reputation as a professor of singing. We call attention to this fact, as in the examiners' report it was stated "that her vocal ability was not yet so marked as might be desired." She was, not withstanding, judged of sufficient ability, especially in theory and pianoforte playing, to

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<sup>10</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal* (Sydney, NSW), 21 October 1893, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> See R. S. Stevens, “Emily Patton: An Australian Pioneer of Tonic Sol-fa in Japan”, *Research Studies in Music Education*, No. 14 (June 2000), pp. 40-49.

<sup>12</sup> See R. S. Stevens, “Samuel McBurney - Australian Tonic Sol-fa Advocate”, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Vol .34, No. 2 (Summer 1986), pp. 77-87.

<sup>13</sup> *The Australasian* (Melbourne), 24 February 1883, p. 19; *South Bourke and Mornington Journal* (Richmond, Victoria), 31 October 1883, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Illustrated Australian News* (Melbourne, Vic., 1876-1889), 21 February 1883, p. 27.

entitle her to presentation of the scholarship. Those who know Miss Bloxham best are persuaded that her natural ability, aided by her untiring perseverance and devotion to her art, will cause her to profit to the utmost of the great advantages which, by the generosity of Sir William Clarke, have been placed within her reach.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to her departure for England, a complimentary concert was “tended” to Ada at the Melbourne Athenaeum on 22 February 1884 where a purse of gold coins was presented to her by Victorian Tonic Sol-fa-ists.<sup>16</sup> Ada had already passed several examinations of the Tonic Sol-fa College including the Matriculation Certificate in 1883,<sup>17</sup> and the Associate diploma in 1883,<sup>18</sup> and also appears to have received singing tuition from the celebrated contralto and “Australian Marchesi” Madame Lucy Chambers (1840–1894).<sup>19</sup>

In Britain, Ada resided in Kensington, close to the Royal College where she spent four years studying with Madame Otto Goldschmidt (better known as Jenny Lind) and gained the Associate diploma of the college (A.R.C.M.). Ada’s pursuit of her musical studies was reportedly achieved “with marked success” which led the College principal, Sir George Grove, to waive her fees in recognition of her success.<sup>20</sup>

While in London, Ada continued Tonic Sol-fa studies, qualifying for Membership of the College in 1885.<sup>21</sup> Having completed Branch III of the Advanced Certificate and the other subjects required, Ada qualified as a Fellow of the Tonic Sol-fa College.<sup>22</sup> In recognition of Ada being the first woman to be awarded a Fellowship, the College Secretary, Robert Griffiths, invited subscriptions from Tonic Sol-fa supporters to purchase a Fellowship hood, cap and gown for her. Those subscribing included some of the leading Tonic Sol-fa-ists in the United Kingdom who presented her with her regalia on 3 June 1888, a few days prior to her leaving for Australia.<sup>23</sup> A photograph of her in her Fellowship regalia was taken on her return to Melbourne and subsequently published under the heading of “A Lady Fellow” in *The Musical Herald* in December 1889.<sup>24</sup> This photograph was reproduced again as one of twenty-nine “Pioneers and Propagandists” featured in Chapter XI – Our Portrait Gallery of *Tonic Sol-fa Jubilee: A Popular Record and Handbook* published for fifty years celebration of the Tonic Sol-fa movement in 1891, the point being made that “... the Tonic Sol-fa College has no qualms of conscience as to the admission of women to degrees”.<sup>25</sup> Ada was one of only three women included in the “Portrait Gallery”, the other two being Mrs J. Spencer Curwen—daughter-in-law of John

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier, SA), Saturday, 8 March 1884, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, March 1883, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, November 1883, p. 182.

<sup>19</sup> Some Australian Women. Part IV. [23 May 1891], *The Institute of Australian Culture* (website) (based on an article in *The Illustrated Sydney News* (Sydney, NSW), Saturday 23 May 1891, pp. 14-15) at <http://www.instituteofaustralianculture.com/some-australian-women-part-4-1891/> (accessed 3/04/2014).

<sup>20</sup> Tea-Table Talk, *The Western Mail* (Perth), 9 April 1887, p. 26

<sup>21</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, December 1885, p. 234.

<sup>22</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, May 1888, p. 404.

<sup>23</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, December 1888, p. 454.

<sup>24</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, May 1889, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> J. Spencer Curwen and John Graham, *Tonic Sol-fa Jubilee: A Popular Record and Handbook* (London: J. Curwen and Sons, c. 1891).

Curwen and author *The Child Pianist*, and Mrs Stapleton—the first of Curwen’s Tonic Sol-fa teachers.



*Ada Bloxham in the regalia of a Fellow of the Tonic Sol-fa College, London*  
(Source: *The Musical Herald*, December 1889, p. 104)

Ada set sail for her return to Melbourne on 8 July 1888<sup>26</sup> and on arriving back in the colony of Victoria, was welcomed at a reception given by the Victorian Tonic Sol-fa Association at which she presented a paper on the history, scope and work of the Tonic Sol-fa College.<sup>27</sup> She was also welcomed back at another “complimentary concert” held at “Cliveden” in East Melbourne on the evening of 12 December 1888. The evening was hosted by Sir William and Lady Clarke and the concert itself included items by leading Melbourne musicians as well as Ada presenting an item.<sup>28</sup> She then set up in practice as a music teacher in Coburg, where she had resided prior to her studies in London.<sup>29</sup>

### **Her Life and Work Abroad**

Ada became engaged to be married to the brother of Samuel McBurney, then leading exponent of Tonic Sol-fa in Victoria.<sup>30</sup> However, the engagement was apparently broken off. With the death of her father in October 1893 and her mother’s retirement as Matron of the

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<sup>26</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa Reporter*, December 1888, p. 454.

<sup>27</sup> *The Musical Herald*, 1 January 1889, p.21.

<sup>28</sup> *The Australasian* (Melbourne), 22 December 1888, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> *The Musical Herald* 1 January 1889, p.21.

<sup>30</sup> *The Musical Herald*, 1 January 1889, p. 8.

Girls' Reformatory School, Coburg, after twenty-three years of service,<sup>31</sup> Ada decided to leave Melbourne for overseas taking her mother with her. Ada intended firstly to visit Japan where her friend and mentor Emily Patton<sup>32</sup> had set up a music teaching practice and then to travel on to Europe to further her musical studies before returning to reside in Sydney.<sup>33</sup> A "complimentary concert" in recognition of completion of her course at the Royal College of Music and also presumably her imminent departure overseas was accorded to Ada by the musical community in Coburg. The concert programme featured several local musicians with Ada also contributing a vocal item.<sup>34</sup>

Ada and her mother departed Melbourne on board the Eastern and Australian Steamship Company's ship, *Catterthun*, on 8 March 1893.<sup>35</sup> Their destination was Yokohama in Japan where Emily Patton had her music teaching practice. Emily Patton had learned Tonic Sol-fa from Samuel McBurney and in turn she had taught the system to Ada. Patton had established herself as a teacher of keyboard harmony from the mid 1870s using an ingenious colour-based teaching method which culminated in her publication of *Harmony Simplified for Popular Use*.<sup>36</sup> She taught her method at Vieusseux's Ladies' College in East Melbourne and, in the latter half of the 1870s, at the new Presbyterian Ladies' College.<sup>37</sup> Patton's pupils at this time included the daughters of the colonial governor and also Ellen Mitchell (later to become famous as the soprano Nellie Melba).<sup>38</sup> Patton who had studied the Tonic Sol-fa method from about 1879, became a strong supporter of its use for vocal music. During the 1880s, she taught music as a private teacher from her home in Studley Park Road, Kew (Patton, 1880), later at 30 Russell Street in Melbourne city and later still from home at "Tyrene" in Erin Street, Richmond.<sup>39</sup>

Following the deaths of her son in 1886, her father in 1887 and her husband in 1888, Emily decided to emigrate to Japan with her daughter Gwendoline and settled in Yokohama, then the principal diplomatic (European) settlement in Japan, on the advice of friends that she could earn a good living there as a music teacher.<sup>40</sup> Tragedy struck Patton again when her daughter Gwendoline—then aged 23 years—contracted cholera and died on 29 October 1891. Having confirmed the viability of her music teaching in Yokohama, Patton offered her former pupil Ada Bloxham employment in her teaching practice. Having transferred to second steamship, Ada with

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<sup>31</sup> Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools, Victoria, *Report of the Secretary for the Year 1891*, (Melbourne: Government Printer), p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Ada had apparently been a childhood friend Emily Patton's two children, Reginald and Gwendoline (Patton, E. S., *Circular Letter* [No. 4, 1899]. E. S. Patton, 1899.)

<sup>33</sup> *Goulburn Herald*, Friday, 10 March, 1893, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *The Coburg Leader*, Wednesday, 8 June 1892, p.3.

<sup>35</sup> *Western Herald* (Bourke, NSW), Saturday, 11 March 1893, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> E. S. Patton, *Harmony Simplified for Popular Use: An Original Method of Applying the First Principles of Harmony to the Object of Accompanying the Voice on the Pianoforte* (London: Novello, Ewer & Co., and Melbourne: Allan & Co. [Wilkie's], 1880).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> There are several references to Melba being one of Patton's pupils—e.g. "Scrapbook: Mrs. Emily Sophia Patton", Harold S. Williams Collection (Series 1, Folder 101, Box 15), Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra, p. 19; and *Tokyo Daily News* 3.1.1891, p. 2. In addition, Patton is known to have taught keyboard harmony as a visiting music teacher at Presbyterian Ladies' College during 1879 and 1880 (Patton 1880) and that Melba was a pupil there between 1875 and 1880 (Hetherington 1967, pp. 20, 23).

<sup>39</sup> Williams n.d., p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> J. F. Forde ('Old Chum'), 'Early Melbourne' (No. 132), *Truth* (Melbourne, 1912).



her mother arrived at Yokohama on the British vessel *Belgic* on 6 April 1893<sup>41</sup> and by the end of that year had a number of pupils learning music by Tonic Sol-fa as well as music from staff notation.<sup>42</sup>

Initially Ada and her mother resided with Emily Patton at 47A The Bluff where Patton operated the Yokohama Schools of Music and Academy of Dancing.<sup>43</sup> Ada took an active part not only in teaching students but also in assisting Emily Patton with her Juvenile Tonic Sol-fa Choral Society where Ada contributed both her own sung items and those of her pupils.<sup>44</sup> Emily Patton and Ada Bloxham were jointly appointed as part-time lecturers at the *Tokyo Ongaku Gakko*—the Tokyo Academy of Music (precursor of the present-day Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music)—to teach Tonic Sol-fa from October 1894 until March 1895.<sup>45</sup> They travelled by train from Yokohama to Tokyo and worked for three hours with Tonic Sol-fa classes on Wednesdays and Saturdays for this period until, due to continuing pressure to utilise the German “conservatoire” approach to music education,<sup>46</sup> their period of engagement concluded on April 2 1895.<sup>47</sup>

By 1897 Ada and her mother were residing at 84B The Bluff.<sup>48</sup> Aside from her teaching activities, Ada also performed as a vocal soloist at concerts in Yokohama and Tokyo. For example, she appeared as a soloist at a concert held at the Tokyo Music School on 24 November 1894 that was conducted by Franz Eckert. Ada performed items by Gounod, Mascagni and Sullivan both as a soloist and in duet with a Mr Braccialini, accompanied at the piano by Mme Poole and Mme Toyama.<sup>49</sup> The concert also drew on the resources of the Imperial Court Orchestra and the Chorus of the Imperial Academy of Music.

After six years at Yokohama, Ada left Japan at the close of 1899. Her departure was a source of great loss to her teacher, mentor and friend Emily Patton. Writing in her Circular Letter (an annual end-of-year letter that she had printed and sent to friends abroad), Patton expressed her regret at Emily’s departure:

... my dear friend and old pupil Ada Bloxham ... [has] left with her mother for South Africa ... She had practised her profession for six years in Yokohama with great success, deservedly reaping both money and reputation, besides gaining a host of private friends, but at the expense of health. The climate of Japan never suited her, and had she remained she would soon have broken down altogether. Professionally it will be hard for the community to replace her, and personally I shall miss her dreadfully, for she was the only link in Japan that bound me to the old days in Melbourne, when she and my poor children were playmates.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *The Japan Weekly*, 8 April 1893, pp. 433-4.

<sup>42</sup> *The Musical Herald*, 1 December 1893, p. 299.

<sup>43</sup> *Meiklejohn’s Japan Directory 1895*. (Yokohama, Japan: R. Meiklejohn & Co.).

<sup>44</sup> *The Musical Herald*, 1 August 1894, p. 239.

<sup>45</sup> Tokyo Ongaku Gakko Archives 1894.

<sup>46</sup> Raphael Koeber was appointed to the *Tokyo Ongaku Gakko* from 1897 to 1909 and August Junker from 1900 to 1912 (Ishikawa 1964, p. 5).

<sup>47</sup> Tokyo Ongaku Gakko Archives 1895.

<sup>48</sup> *Meiklejohn’s Japan Directory 1897*. (Yokohama, Japan: R. Meiklejohn & Co.).

<sup>49</sup> Concert program (in French), 24 November 1893, held in the Museum of the Tokyo Music School.

<sup>50</sup> Patton, E. S., *Circular Letter* [No. 4, 1899]. E. S. Patton, 1899.

## Her Later Life and Work

Ada apparently travelled first to Ceylon<sup>51</sup> and from there travelled to South Africa where she married John Edwin Palmer (born c. 1872-74) originally from Shrewsbury in England and then stationed in Johannesburg, at St. Paul's Church in Durban on 4 April 1901.<sup>52</sup> Ada's husband had enlisted as a Trooper in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Imperial Light Horse and had fought in the Boer War of 1889–1902 at the battle of Elandslaagte in Natal and also in Transvaal.<sup>53</sup> By the time of his marriage, he had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant.<sup>54</sup>

Ada had two children— Beatrice Helen Palmer (born 1904) and Ethleen Mary Palmer (born 1 August 1906 at Yeoville, Johannesburg; died 8 April 1958). As Mrs Palmer, Ada continued as a music teacher in Johannesburg, being listed in the South African list of *The Tonic Sol-fa College Calendar 1909-10*.<sup>55</sup> Ada's mother Mary had apparently accompanied her daughter to South Africa but in June 1909 Ada with her two daughters and her mother travelled to England<sup>56</sup> and then to France. Mary died on 6 February 1911<sup>57</sup> presumably in France.

Ada returned to England with her two daughters<sup>58</sup> and by 1912 she was teaching music in the south of England, residing at The Rowans, Rowlands Road, West Worthing.<sup>59</sup> When probate was being arranged for Mary Bloxham's will from August of 1911, John Palmer (who was the executor) was living at "The Ridge", Webb Street, Yeoville in Johannesburg and was employed as a manager by the Native Labour Organisation of the Barnato Group of Mines (which was involved in diamond mining and was the main competitor to famous De Beers company). John Palmer may well have returned to France to finalise a farming operation as he embarked from Cherbourg in northwest France (listing his occupation as "farmer") on a ship bound for New York in July 1912,<sup>60</sup> presumably en route to South Africa. By 1919, Ada had returned to South Africa<sup>61</sup> and resided at 287 Montpelier Road, Berea, Durban<sup>62</sup> where she continued her music teaching.

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<sup>51</sup> *The Musical Herald*, January 1900, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Marriages solemnised at St Paul's Church, Durban, 1901, p.29; *The Natal Mercury*, 5 April 1901, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Palmer, Edwin John, Trooper (Regimental number 608), 1<sup>st</sup> Imperial Light Horse, UK, Military Campaign Medal and Award Rolls, 1793-1949 (Military: 1899-1902 - South Africa), Public Records Office Reference WO 100/250.

<sup>54</sup> Marriages solemnised at St Paul's Church, Durban, 1901, p.29; *The Musical Herald*, 1 June 1901, p. 166.

<sup>55</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa College Calendar 1909-10*, p. ??.

<sup>56</sup> UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960.

<sup>57</sup> Supreme Court of the State of Victoria, Affidavit of Execution in the Will of Mary Francis Bloxham, 16 December 1911.

<sup>58</sup> Papers of Ethleen Palmer [manuscript], Art Gallery of New South Wales, Research Library and Archive (MS2000.5) < [http://library.ag.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/spydu.exe/ENQ/OPAC/BIBENQ/3395?QRY=CAUBIB<%20IRN\(496060\)&QRYTEXT=Palmer%2C%20Ethleen%2C%201906-1958](http://library.ag.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/spydu.exe/ENQ/OPAC/BIBENQ/3395?QRY=CAUBIB<%20IRN(496060)&QRYTEXT=Palmer%2C%20Ethleen%2C%201906-1958) > [accessed 1/08/2015].

<sup>59</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa College Calendar 1912-13*, p. 194

<sup>60</sup> New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957, S.S. "Olympic" sailing from Cherbourg on 17 July 1912.

<sup>61</sup> Catalogue entry for Papers of Ethleen Palmer [http://library.ag.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/spydu.exe/ENQ/OPAC/BIBENQ/3395?QRY=CAUBIB<%20IRN\(496060\)&QRYTEXT=Palmer%2C%20Ethleen%2C%201906-1958](http://library.ag.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/spydu.exe/ENQ/OPAC/BIBENQ/3395?QRY=CAUBIB<%20IRN(496060)&QRYTEXT=Palmer%2C%20Ethleen%2C%201906-1958) [accessed 1/08/2015].

<sup>62</sup> *The Tonic Sol-fa College Calendar 1924-27*, p. 117.

It was from about this time that husband and wife may well have separated as Ada and her daughters then sailed for Australia arriving at Albany, Western Australia in 1923<sup>63</sup> and travelling on to Sydney four years later in 1927. They resided first at Warringah and later at Mackellar. Meanwhile, John Palmer had travelled from South Africa to England, embarking from Liverpool in August 1937 for Valparaiso in Chile at the age of 65 years<sup>64</sup> where he may well have been involved in mining operations.

Little of known of Ada during her last years. There is no indication that she was involved in music teaching or in any other musical activities. Interestingly, however, her daughter Ethleen achieved considerable success in the visual arts with, among other works, wood block prints produced in the Japanese style.<sup>65</sup> This part of her artistic output was most undoubtedly influenced by her mother's experience of Japan during the 1890s.

Ada died at the age of 91 years on 17 September 1956 at her home at 174 Narrabeen Park Parade, Warriewood, a Sydney suburb, and was cremated at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium.<sup>66</sup> She was survived by her two daughters, Beatrice, aged 52 years and Ethleen, aged 50.

### **Musical Achievements**

Like Emily Patton, her Tonic Sol-fa teacher, mentor and friend, Ada appears to have been imbued with an adventurous spirit which took her from Australia first to England, then to Japan, Ceylon, South Africa, France, England, back to South Africa and finally returning to her native Australia.

In addition to her achievements as the inaugural Clarke Scholarship winner, the first Australian enrolled at the Royal College of Music and first woman fellow of the Tonic Sol-fa College, Ada also achieved distinction in several other aspects during her life. Firstly, she demonstrated—as one of her teachers and mentors, Samuel McBurney, maintained—that the Tonic Sol-fa system was a highly effective means of developing music literacy, aural perception, theoretical understanding and general musicianship. As noted earlier, at her examination for the Clarke Scholarship, it was widely reported in the press “that her vocal ability was not yet so marked as might be desired”<sup>67</sup> but her other musical skills—and piano performance skills that persuaded the examiners of her potential to achieve success in the Royal College of Music studies.

Ada's study of the Tonic Sol-fa system and well as staff notation, harmony, aural perception and composition to advanced levels culminated in her gaining a Fellowship of the Tonic Sol-fa

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<sup>63</sup> Papers of Ethleen Palmer [manuscript], Art Gallery of New South Wales, Research Library and Archive (MS2000.5).

<sup>64</sup> PassengerList, S.S. “Lorgia” sailing from Liverpool on 14 August 1937 (Board of Trade, Surveyors Office, Liverpool).

<sup>65</sup> Watson, A (1995), “Ethleen Mary Palmer b. 1906”, *Design & Art Australia Online* [website], [https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/version\\_history/ethleen-mary-palmer/biography/?p=1&revision\\_no=36](https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/version_history/ethleen-mary-palmer/biography/?p=1&revision_no=36) [accessed 1/08/2015].

Also see Josef Lebovics Gallery, *Collectors' Lists 114 (2005) and 133 (2008) – Ethleen Palmer* at <http://www.joseflebovicgallery.com/catalogue/archive/cat-114-2005/pages/pg07.html> and at [http://www.joseflebovicgallery.com/catalogue/cl\\_133\\_2008/Pages/pg02.html](http://www.joseflebovicgallery.com/catalogue/cl_133_2008/Pages/pg02.html) (accessed 3/04/2014).

<sup>66</sup> Death Registration for Ada Beatrice Palmer, 1956/020483 (Sydney: Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages).

<sup>67</sup> *Illustrated Australian News* (Melbourne, Vic., 1876-1889), 21 February 1883, p. 27.

College. This also prepared her for a key role in promoting Tonic Sol-fa through her teaching of music in Melbourne, Yokohama, Durban and England and presumably also in Sydney. Her teaching with Emily Patton at the *Tokyo Ongaku Gakko* (The Tokyo Music School), albeit for a limited period, nevertheless indicates her high level of expertise as a Tonic Sol-fa teacher and high standing as a musician.

Another aspect of Ada's character that was undoubtedly reinforced by her association with Emily Patton was her adventurous spirit and the confidence to travel to and live in foreign countries. This applied particularly to Japan where unmarried European women would not normally have been given with professional respect or social status unless they were able to demonstrate strength and determination in their dealings with the local community. From this, it may be implied that Ada may well have exemplified the late nineteenth century emergence of the women's rights movement and gender equality during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

### **Coda**

Much has been written on the issue of "nature versus nurture" in relation to musicality. It is interesting to note that Ada Bloxham's great great niece, Anna Connolly,<sup>68</sup> has also achieved prominence both as a fine vocalist—a soprano—and as a vocal music pedagogue. Anna holds the position of Senior Lecturer in Voice at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music at The University of Melbourne. This is surely an instance of nature as well as nurture at play.

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<sup>68</sup> See Anna Connolly's professional profile at <http://www.findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/display/person2816>