

Nellie Stewart

'THERE'S A GREAT DEAL OF VANITY
CONNECTED WITH THE THINGS I DO!!!!'

Ian Warden describes the spellbinding character of singer and actress Nellie Stewart, born 150 years ago

When the Sydney monthly magazine *The Theatre* interviewed Nellie Stewart for its October 1911 edition, it called her, uncontroversially, 'the most generally admired and the most beloved actress Australia will probably ever know'. It was the edition's cover story complete with a photograph of her in the splendid ostrich-plumed costume from her greatest triumph *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*. Stewart, who emerges from this long 1911 interview and from her autobiography as a narcissist, would probably have agreed with the magazine's fulsome description of her.

Who was Nellie Stewart and why was she so admired and so adored? And what was she *really* like, given that her enormous and picture-rich autobiography *My Life's Story* (1923) is an artful work of gushing self-advertisement? And the one biography of her, Marjorie Skill's *Sweet Nell Of Old Sydney* (1974), is too fulsome in its praise for its subject to be helpful.

The National Library of Australia is blessed with some Stewartiana, including letters written by her on sumptuous notepaper and in theatrically huge handwriting, often melodramatically punctuated with rows of as many as 13 exclamation marks!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Eleanor (Nellie) Towzey Stewart was born on 20 November 1858 in Woolloomooloo in Sydney. Her father, Richard, was a singer/comedian and sometime theatre manager, and her mother, Theodosia, was an actress and a descendant of a long line of famous Drury Lane (London) thespians.

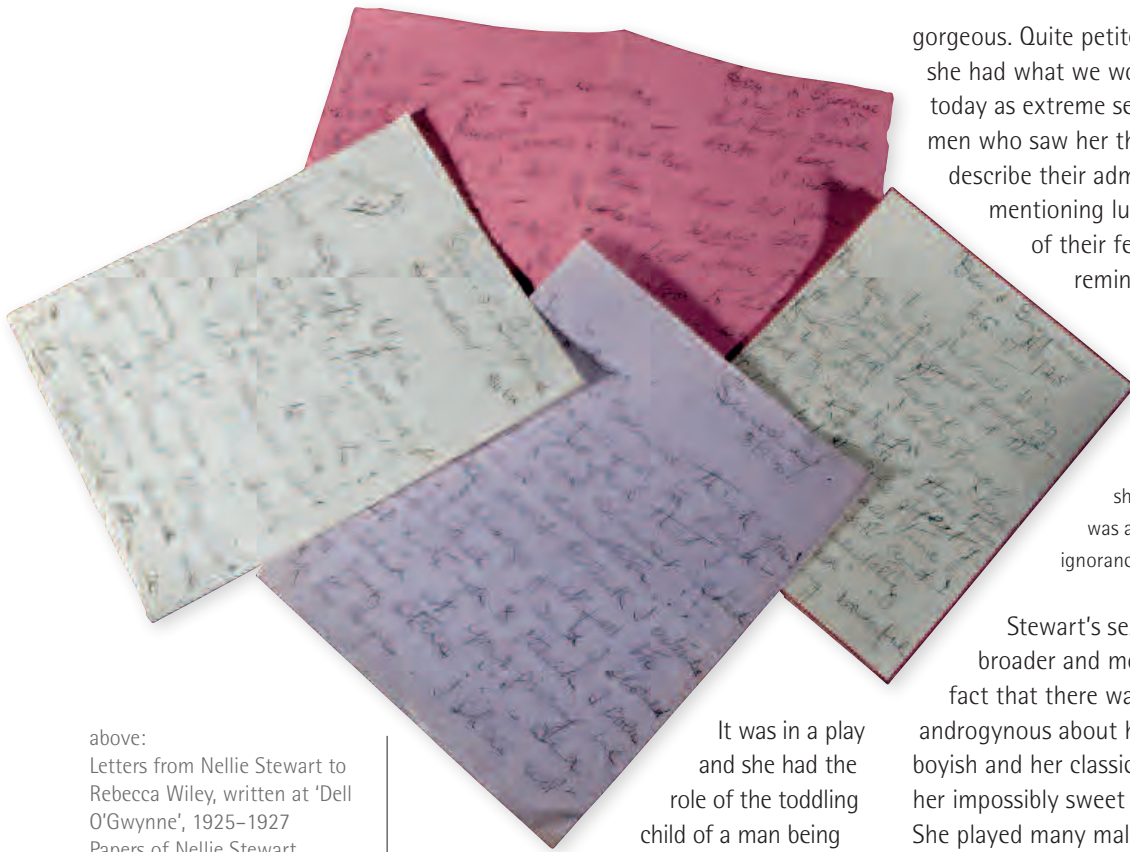
Stewart, born to these creatures of the theatre, was to go on to be the bewitching prima donna in more than 34 operas and



operettas and, most memorably, to be the star of the play *Sweet Nell of Old Drury*. As Sweet Nell, she was Nell Gwynne, the common (but uncommonly beautiful and admirable) London orange-seller, who became the influential mistress of King Charles II. Stewart was thought so fabulous as Nell that some speculated that she might be the real Nell reincarnated. She called her home in Mosman in Sydney (where she died in 1931) 'Den o'Gwynne'.

Shortly after her birth, the family moved to Melbourne where, when she was two (she claims), she made her first stage appearance.

Harcourt McGuffie
Miss Nellie Stewart as 'Sweet Nell'
c.1909
coloured postcard; 13.7 x 8.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22963587



above:
Letters from Nellie Stewart to Rebecca Wiley, written at 'Dell O'Gwynne', 1925–1927
Papers of Nellie Stewart
Manuscripts Collection
MS 3336

below:
Harcourt McGuffie
Sincere Xmas Wishes, Nellie Stewart, Botanical Gardens, Melbourne (between 1890 and 1920)
coloured postcard; 13.8 x 8.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22947006



It was in a play and she had the role of the toddling child of a man being played by her father. She reflects in *My Life's Story*:

That first appearance did not determine my destiny, my birth did that ... But it did set the seal on my calling and inclination. From that time on ... always I knew I was fated for the theatre.

Thus fated, what was so wonderful about the star that Nellie Stewart became? She was

very gifted and very beautiful and, vain and anxious about her appearance and devoted to a regime of frugal eccentricities of diet, she remained handsome for decades and had a long, long career. She was almost 70 when she gave her last performance as Nell, still convincingly youthful and pneumatic enough to turn a king's head.

Her heyday coincided with the height of the craze of the sending and collecting of celebrity picture postcards and the National Library has dozens of Nellie Stewart postcards in every one of which she is gobsmackingly

gorgeous. Quite petite, but lithe and athletic, she had what we would freely discuss today as extreme sex appeal, while the men who saw her then had to struggle to describe their admiration of her without mentioning lust's part in the alchemy of their feelings. Hector Bolitho reminisced that:

I don't think I was aware of charm and beauty until I saw her ... I was still a boy and she gave shape to my yearning ... I was all wonder, worship and ignorance.

Stewart's sexual allure was made broader and more complex by the fact that there was something excitingly androgynous about her. Her body was boyish and her classic female dimples shared her impossibly sweet face with a noble chin. She played many male roles in pantomime and was sometimes a convincingly dashing Romeo in cameo productions of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

She was an obsessive perfectionist. She would enter so entirely into her roles that she would hate anyone to come and address her as Nellie in her dressing room during intervals, when she was still immersed in being Sweet Nell, Blue-Eyed Susan or Yum-Yum. A San Francisco theatre critic, writing about her performance as Sweet Nell, credited her with a 'dancing play of features'. He thought that 'for a variety of interpretive facial expressions she depends more than any actress we've known on the full and free use of her facial muscles'.

A smitten man wrote in 1923 that 'She has a [singing] voice that can be attuned to the melting tones of tenderness, or can ring clamantly'. Someone else thought she had 'the sweetest voice imaginable, with just a slight trace [her influential mother was Irish] of the Irish brogue in it'. She had a brilliant soprano voice but may have damaged that voice in 1888 when she took on her first grand opera role as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* and sang it on a scarcely imaginable 24 successive nights. Later in her career, and never wanting to be less than adorably perfect for her fans, she sang less. She remarked that 'There's a great deal of vanity connected with the



things I do!!!!' in a letter to a friend, in which she explained how, not in good health and so not able to perform with adorable perfection, she was choosing not to perform at all.

However voice-spoiling the 1888 mistake was, she was still singing thrillingly on 9 May 1901 when, for the Duke and Duchess of York and 10 000 others, she sang the keynote hymn, *Australia*, at the glittering concert in Melbourne's cavernous Royal Exhibition Building. It was the evening of the day of the official opening of Australia's first Federal Parliament. She made a great impression on everyone and not least on her egocentric self.

Selected to represent Australia ... I was strung up to a fearful pitch ... But when I did begin to sing I kept my head and with cunning ... I turned at such an angle that I sang right into the Duke and Duchess and my voice, striking the wall behind them, came back and filled the building.

It is doubtful whether any mortal voice could even half-fill such a mammoth building but Stewart boasts that hers did fill it on what was 'the happiest day of my life'.

What of the great woman's personality? Though fascinating, *My Life's Story* contains hardly a word of self-criticism. It is a fascinating study in extreme egocentricity or (since someone with sufficient self-esteem does not feel the need to be so egocentric) in extreme insecurity. There are some breathtakingly boastful passages.

The thing that stands first and foremost in my life ... is the great gift God has given me of loving and winning the love of my fellow creatures, all of them.

The biography of Stewart is so reverent that when, in its twilight pages, it quotes her chauffeur saying, after her death, that 'she was a lovely woman, temperamental but understanding', the word 'temperamental' startles because nothing much temperamental about her has been described in the book. The reader hankers for more information about this human (and humanising) flaw. Perhaps her next biographer, still admiring but not besotted, will enable a more complete Nellie Stewart to emerge by asking some searching questions on what was 'temperamental'

above left:
Unknown photographer
Nellie Stewart as 'Prince Charming'
in 'Cinderella', in 1901
reproduced from *My Life's Story* by
Nellie Stewart
(Sydney: J. Sands, 1923)

above right:
Falk
Miss Nellie Stewart c.1913
b&w postcard; 13.9 x 9.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an22966179



above left:
 Leon Caron (1850–1905)
Nautch Song
 (Sydney: H.J. Samuell, c.1895)
 Music and Dance Collection
 nla.mus-an6649279



above right:
 Maisie Rowlands
Nellie Stewart Waltz
 (Sydney: Albert & Son, c.1910)
 Music and Dance Collection
 nla.mus-an22506968

about her and on the impact on her personality of what seems an extreme psychological dependence on audiences' approval and love.

In her 1911 interview, she announced herself 'strongly opposed' to her daughter Nancye's acting ambitions because, lacking the rare 'genius' displayed by her mother, she, Nancye, was doomed to heartbreaking failure.

The stage brings out all the worst qualities in your nature—not if you get, like me, to the top of the tree—but in girls who have to plug away.

She also revealed her eccentricities in the interview, when she claimed she could exert 'the power of the mind over the body' and that this was why, refusing to let herself age, she was remaining eerily youthful. And when one day she suddenly gave up smoking, she reported it was because of the divine sign of her 'dropping' a cigarette, which had been dashed from her fingers by the late George. He had intervened from the Other Side for her health's sake. Then there was her odd diet. In addition to drinking lots of hot water, she claimed that 'Before I go to the theatre for the performance I drink a cupful of meat-juice crushed from

three pounds of raw meat by a machine I bought in Paris'.

Nellie Stewart's ashes are buried in a cemetery in Kew in Melbourne at a grave decorated with the sculpture of an angel that is, from the unmistakably lovely face, a winged version of Nellie Stewart. Was this the indicated wish of the woman who confessed 'There's a great deal of vanity connected with the things I do!!!!!!'? Certainly Nellie Stewart left instructions for the style of her funeral, requiring it to imitate the funeral of the great Shakespearean leading lady Ellen Terry.

Egocentric or not, what a star she was! If a fairy godmother granted us just one excursion back in Australian time, some of us would unhesitatingly use it to go and see and hear our nation's 'most beloved' performer. O to be there with the Duke and Duchess of York and the select 10 000 to hear that voice ringing clamantly! O to be there not only to thrill to the occasion but also to check Australia's idol's claim that this special voice fills the building!

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