

# Croft House Settlement Operatic Society

by T. Alec Seed

*This is one chapter of the memoirs of my grandfather, T. Alec Seed (1887-1967), written in 1951. It paints a vivid picture of his time with the Croft House Settlement Operatic and Dramatic Society. I have left Alec's manuscript unaltered, although I have removed typing errors. I hope his jottings are of interest to today's members of the Society.  
Philip A Seed, June 2010.*

My first connection with the Croft House Settlement Operatic and Dramatic Society was about 1911 when I acted as stage manager in a Christmas play. It was the "Christmas Carol" written by Cecil Everitt. As will be well known there are several scenes describing Scrooge's dream and these have to follow each other with little or no break, otherwise the continuity would be spoiled. In this version of the story the changes from scene to scene were done in what are termed 'black-outs', and what was equally important, in absolute silence. I remember I bought a pair of slippers with very thick felt soles and heels, and trained my helpers to a fraction of a hairsbreadth so that everything could be changed quickly. Each person had one property to carry off and another to carry on, and they had to avoid getting in each other's way. All went well and Cecil, who was himself playing "Scrooge", was very warm in his thanks.



T. Alec Seed - Mikado 1917

That was the beginning of my long association and friendship with Cecil Everitt. He suggested I should become a playing member of the Society which I did, in 1913. I played in the chorus for two shows and, thereafter for 25 years in all, principal parts. I give a list of these, for anyone who is interested, at the end of this chapter. The parts are pretty varied and I can honestly say that, with one or two exceptions, I enjoyed them all. My worst performances, without a doubt, were "Papillon" in "The Duchess of Dantzic" (I never could remember the words of the song) and "Sir Archibald Slackitt" in "The Toreador". In both these parts I never felt at home and the mere memorizing of the words was a burden. I think my best performances were "Hishimoto" in "The Mousmé", "Peter Doody" in "The Arcadians", "The Mikado", "Amadeo" in "Sylvia's Lovers" and "King Christian" in "Princess Charming"... at least I felt most happy in these parts.

I was quite content to let Cecil Everitt be the comedian and never attempted to steal his thunder. I think that is why the best Croft House shows in those days were when Cecil and I had a lot to do together... as in "The Mousmé" for instance. Cecil was a brilliant actor and an extraordinarily fine producer. Those who saw the finished products of the Croft House shows knew little of the painstaking work he had put in to them, but we, who worked with him, knew and appreciated it. It is true there were difficulties but the overriding factor we all had in mind was that we played to raise funds for the Croft House Settlement which did and still does great work in the slums. The only serious difference of opinion which Cecil and I had was caused by others and a frank talk soon cleared the air between us. Cecil was not merely a clever comedian, he was a very good straight actor as was proved by his performance of "Napoleon" in the "The Duchess of Dantzic".

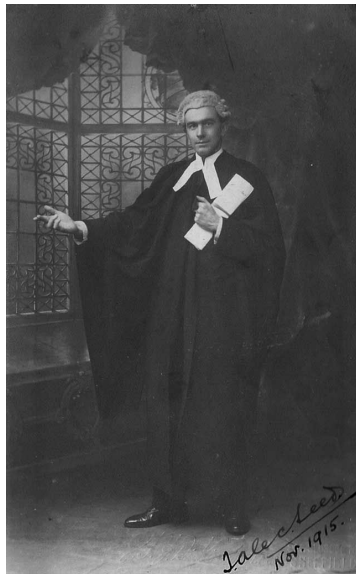
We had some very funny experiences together on the stage. One that stands out in my mind most is an incident in the "The Mousmé". After the earthquake poor old "Hashimoto" appears with a baby in a pram which he has found amongst the ruins. He meets "Suki" (played by Cecil) and they discuss what they shall do with the baby, using a book "Hints to young Mothers" (pronounced moth-ers) as a guide. The laughter which this scene caused was unbelievable. Often we left the pram downstage and retired upstage to discuss other matters, leaving the audience helpless with laughter. We timed this laughter one night... it was exactly a minute and a half. On one occasion a woman in the gallery shrieked: "Oh, for God's sake, stop, mister" which, of course increased the hilarity.

On another occasion at the Lyceum Theatre when I was playing "Gobo" in "Les Cloches de Corneville" an incident happened which was rather disconcerting at the time, but which, at the same time, was amusing and complimentary. Stage hands at professional theatres are the keenest of critics, and, what is more, well informed critics. There was one of these at the Lyceum Theatre, a big fellow with a very loud, deep and "beery" voice. As a class these men are great beer drinkers and this is reflected in their voices. This man was standing where I could see him in the wings whilst I was delivering "Gobo's" oration in the market place. The speech usually got a round of applause and above the noise of this I could hear a booming voice from the wings... "Bloody fine". I felt sure the audience heard it but these stagehands know just how far to go. Unfortunately the chorus heard it and turned to look who it was.

Incidentally, we used five pounds worth of new farthings to represent the miser's gold. We finished the week with about one

pound's worth. No doubt the neighbouring pubs benefitted by the "sweepings-up".

In the "Arcadians" we used a police horse named "Duke" in the race scene. It was a most intelligent animal and even recognised some of us afterwards on the streets. By the Thursday night of the show our difficulty was not to make him go on the stage, but to keep him off. We gave him a basket of fruit on the last night and he nosed in it for a lump of sugar hidden there. Then he bowed to the audience (so it seemed) but actually he was seeking another lump of sugar.



T. Alec Seed – Counsel for the Plaintiff

My first principal part with Croft House was "Counsel for the Plaintiff" in "Trial by Jury". As this required really singing I had lessons from my old friend the late W.A.Hamer (Bert). He persevered with me and made the most of the poor material. With "Trial" we did "The Pirates of Penzance" and I remember the late Bert Peacock and I had great fun. He was playing the "Sergeant of Police" and I was a Pirate. Arthur Peek was the "pirate King". He was very proud of his song, "for I am a Pirate King" and excellently he sang it. But Bert and I used to echo him with "For I am a Pikelet King" which went very near to putting him off. Every evening Bert and I used to have tea at Davy's before the show. We always had pikelets and this gave us the idea.

The problem of casting was always a thorny one. In the early days of 1918 the casting was done by a Committee. On the whole they did very well, but the chairman, the late Jack B. Gibson, was very nervous about telling people that they had been or had not been cast for a part. When "Iolanthe" was cast in 1918 he came to me very apologetically and said the committee were sorry they couldn't give me the part of "Strephon" *because I couldn't sing*; but they'd be glad if I would play "Private Willie". I accepted with pleasure, but I couldn't help wondering at the committee's reasoning. Not "Strephon" because I could not sing, but "Private Willis" which was all singing or nearly so. However, perhaps they meant that "Strephon" was too high for me (which it was) and it was only dear old Jack's way of putting it.

During the 1913 production of "Iolanthe" I was sitting on a dress basket in the wings at Croft Hall with Flo Lambert when

the lid collapsed and there we were, wedged in the basket with our feet and legs in the air. We couldn't move and everybody was so amused that they never thought of giving us a helping hand. The picture of a peer and a fairy in that position was too much for them.

Croft Hall was very uncomfortable to play in; the Temperance Hall (now<sup>1</sup> the Repertory Theatre) was passable; the Cutler's Hall was just impossible; the Lyceum Theatre was quite good except that it was old fashioned and dirty, but the Empire was first rate. When I first advocated that we should take the Lyceum in 1921 I was laughed at, but the laugh has been with me ever since.

The Society never looked back and the profits mounted every year, so that a very handsome sum of money was paid to the Croft House Settlement every year. In fact, without the money from the Society's productions I doubt if they could have carried on.

In addition to the twenty-two principal parts I had the privilege of playing I was in turn Property Master, Publicity Secretary, Patronage Secretary (I founded the patronage scheme) and Chairman of the Committee. My wife joined the Society during 1915 when she was asked to accompany principals' rehearsals. In 1917 she was elected Hon. Accompanist, a position which she held until 1923 when our children were born. In 1930 she resumed and continued as Hon. Accompanist until 1936. Croft Hall became quite noted for



*Marguerite Pogson - Hon. Accompanist*

the marrying of its members: Cecil Everitt and Muriel Clarke, Billy Wood and Nellie Taylor, Ernest Davies and Elsie Heald, and in 1918 came our wedding. There were many others, I used to have fun with Frank Whitehead, the devoted Hon. Secretary of the Society for so many years. When I was doing the publicity there were so many people with letters after their names that I decided that I would have some too. So I gave Frank the copy for the bills with my name written thus: T. Alec. Seed. H.O.M.P.

Af first he didn't question is, but later he become suspicious that I was pulling his leg and he asked me what the letters stood for. I replied: "Husband of Marguerite Pogson".

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<sup>1</sup> (in 1951)

Dear old Frank Whitehead! What a tremendous job he did for the Croft House Society. He was not easy to work with and, indeed, at one time I believe he was very jealous of me because all my innovations upset his fixed methods of working. He was, too, very sensitive, very brusque and entirely lacking in tact. Those who knew him best realized that all these things arose out of his zeal for his work and we overlooked them. He had a natural charm and, in later years, when we persuaded him to let us help him, he was, I think, happier. He, perhaps naturally, was the biggest doubter about transferring to the Lyceum Theatre but, so generous was his nature, he was the loudest in his praise for the venture when he saw that it has succeeded.

Until the Society gave "Merrie England" in 1920 all the productions were Gilbert and Sullivan operas. I made a special study of these. As works of art they fascinated me. It always made me very angry when anyone started an argument about "which was the predominant partner". It seems so useless to argue that Sullivan's music would last longer than Gilbert's words. Both will last as long as the operas and if the argument is that the music will be played when the operas are forgotten (if such a thing be possible) I think that is false because who, on hearing the music, does not fit the words to it.

I had all the libretti bound in one volume and at one time I could open it at any place and sing the songs. Also, if I heard the music in a concert I could fit the words. I may have been an exception but the point I make is true. It is a hopeful sign that the operas are to-day appealing to the younger dance-tune-soaked generation as they did to their fathers and grandfathers, and if only the standard of production is kept up, I see no reason why they should die ever. Unfortunately there are signs that the productions by the Savoy Company are falling below the standard set by Gilbert. I am all in favour of the copyright of the Savoy Operas becoming the property of the nation, providing there is no 'mucking about with 'em'.

Whilst with Croft House I wrote a lecture on Gilbert which I illustrated with songs, quartettes, etc., and for these illustrations I had the help of a very fine quartette consisting of Elsie Heald, Elsie Hadfield, Ernest Davies, and Arthur Peck, and the accompanist was Marguerite Pogson. I used to turn over for her. I also sang the "Mikado's" song and others of the special class. Later Bert Hamer followed Arthur Peck and George Lawton succeeded Ernest Davies. George was a brilliant singer but, oh, what a trial! He was one of those easy-going fellows whose only consistency was his inconsistency. During the run of a production one never knew whether he was going to turn up or not. I've known him telephone from Rotherham fifteen

minutes before the show was due to start to say that he was on his way. No allowance for traffic delays, accidents or anything. Like most happy-go-lucky people he usually got away with it. On the stage he had a disconcerting trick of skipping pages of libretto and if you were quick enough or lucky enough to pick it up, he would suddenly switch back to the correct place. We used to visualize the libretto page by page in those days. Of course, George was never wrong but would vow it was you who had got on to the wrong page.

In the dressing room he was always trying out his voice or loosening it. Bert Hamer used to do this by sucking grapes, but George used to sing "Your tiny hand is frozen" from "La Boheme". Bert and I got so tired of this that we decided to try to stop it. As soon as George started up we would chant solemnly and in a low voice

"Don't throw the lamp at mother  
Its a shame to waste the oil".

But it had no effect on George. No amount of leg-pulling would upset him. We mimicked him devastatingly in the Society but he would pass it off as a joke. Generous to a fault George was a great adventurer and he gave his services freely in Grand Opera, Comic Opera or Concert in Sheffield. Equally generous, but far more stable and reliable was Bert Hamer. In all the years I played with him I never knew him make a mistake. I gave this "Gilbert" lecture dozens of times and when I couldn't get the quartette, I used to use gramophone records. It wasn't quite the same.

The first time our daughters, born in 1923, saw me in a show was "The Duchess of Dantzic" in 1928. They were very thrilled by the washer woman scene but could hardly believe it was me when I appeared. I'm told it was with difficulty they were restrained from calling out "its Daddy" when they did realize it was me.

During the run of "Virginia" in 1936 my wife and I decided that it was time to make way for the youngsters in the Society. For the first time I felt the part I was playing "Silas P. Hock" the American millionaire, was a strain. I felt, too, that on the management side of the Society there should be some younger blood to enable the Society to carry on the good work. We therefore tendered our resignations.



Everybody was very kind to us and at the matinee tea of the next production we were presented with a Record Player and were given Life Membership, both of which we appreciated highly.

In 1936 I received the Long Service Medal given by the National Operatic and Dramatic Association for my 25 years service with the same society, and more recently I have been elected a Vice President of the Society. I look back on my years with Croft House with the utmost pleasure and not a little pride.

The following are the parts I played with the Croft House Settlement Operatic & Dramatic Society.

**At Croft Hall**

1913 Iolanthe A peer

**At the Temperance Hall**

1914 The Yeomen of the Guard A yeoman

1915 The Pirates of Penzance A pirate  
Trial by Jury Counsel for the Plaintiff

**At Croft Hall**

1917 The Mikado The Mikado

1918 The Yeomen of the Guard Lieutenant of the Tower

1918 Iolanthe Private Willis

1919 The Gondoliers Don Alhambra

**At the Cutler's Hall**

1920 Merrie England Long Tom

**At the Lyceum Theatre**

1921 Les Cloches de Corneville Gobo

1922 The Mousmé Hashimoto

1923 Sylvia's Lovers Amadeo

1924 A Little Dutch Girl Constantine Poach

1925 The Marriage Market Lord Hurlington

1926 The Toreador Sir archibald Slackitt

1927 The Arcadians Peter Doody

1928 The Duchess of Dantzic Papillon

**At the Empire**

1929 The Mousmé Hashimoto

1930 The Desert Song General Birabeau

1931 The Gay Parisienne

1932 Rose Marie Edward Hawley



*T. Alec Seed, Mary Dawes, John Anderson, H. Somerfield*

*"Princess Charming" Sheffield Empire 2-7 Feb. 1931*

1933	Princess Charming	King Christian
1934	Rio Rita	Esteban
1935	Bitter Sweet	Marquis of Slayne
1936	Virginia	Silas P. Hock

Note: After leaving the Society T. Alec Seed went on to become Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Sheffield Repertory Company.