

A BIOGRAPHY OF

EDWARD ELLIOTT

by

Peggy Elliott Ransom

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This document was edited by Bob Albano from Peggy Elliott Ransom's family history entitled ***Little by Little*** (Auckland, New Zealand: Collench Publications, 1995. ISBN 0-473-02978-2). Peggy Elliott Ransom is the daughter of Edward Elliott. Permission to print this document on the TRIBUTE TO VENTRILOQUISM website was granted by Creina Penfold, the granddaughter of Edward Elliott.

Edward Elliott, my father, always wanted to go on the stage.

Well, from the age of seven anyway.

This was when his school put on a Nativity Play and he was cast as one of the Wise Men.

The auditorium was full of proud parents and, of course, the whole thing was supposed to be deadly serious.

And it was until young Edward, making his grand entrance, tripped over the hem of his long robe and with a loud, anguished cry of "Oh, Crumbs!", fell headlong into the lap of the Virgin Mary.

It was as he listened to the audience's uproarious response that my father knew what he wanted to do with his life and vowed secretly, "One day I'm going on the stage and make people laugh."

By necessity, this had to be a secret vow for the year was 1887 and a time when, in true Victorian fashion, the wishes of the head of the family had to be obeyed without question. For a son of his to enter the supposedly sinful world of the theatre would certainly not have been the wish of my rather stern grandfather I can assure you - especially as he had already chosen the career his heir was to pursue.

As the years passed Teddy was able to confide in May about his secret ambition to go on the stage. He discovered that although she had long since abandoned all hope of being allowed to train as a professional dancer, she still wanted to be a writer.

It was at this time, when helping May with her stories and plays, Teddy discovered his own talent for writing and this made him even more determined to pursue a career in the theatre.

In the meantime, however, he was dutifully obeying his parents.

When he left Dulwich College he duly became an Articled Clerk in his father's law firm and attended the necessary lectures to enable him to add yet another Cotton to the long list of family solicitors.

He hated every minute of it.

Just before the turn of the century musical evenings were a popular source of entertainment and, with a large circle of friends, Ann Cotton often organised such a soiree at home.

This was the opportunity for everyone to do their party piece, whether it was singing, playing a musical instrument or reciting dramatic poems, such as 'The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God'. On one such evening May and Teddy decided to surprise everyone.

Having come to the conclusion a little humour would add a bit of much needed gaiety to the proceedings, they took it in turns to recite a couple of clever, funny pieces they had written themselves.

All rather daring, of course, but obviously much appreciated by the guests.

This was indeed fortunate, for their father was looking rather stern as if unable to make up his mind if all the hilarity was suitable to the occasion - especially as his own offspring had been responsible for it.

The next item they dreamed up came as a complete surprise.

May came on with Jimmy MacDilly - a large, floppy, rag doll dressed in kilt and tam'o'shanter. Teddy grabbed it from her, stuffed it into a box and shut the lid.

Immediately the audience heard a broad Scottish voice crying "Let me oot, mon - let me oot," coming from the box.

Well, what a sensation!

How could a rag doll talk? How indeed.

Of course the explanation was really quite simple, although incredible just the same.

It seems that Teddy had actually thrown his voice to make it appear as if Jimmy MacDilly was calling for help.

The applause was resounding and the evening was a great success.

Some wit even suggested Teddy should do it professionally. This remark was greeted with much laughter. The very thought of the son of a staid City of London solicitor doing such a thing was so unthinkable.

Significantly, the only ones who did not join in the laughter were Teddy and May.

The year 1900 was the beginning of a hectic social life for Teddy and May

Word quickly spread about their entertainment value and invitations to musical evenings and weekend house parties came in thick and fast.

Of course, to do justice to their new-found reputation it was necessary to rehearse and write new material. Somewhat naturally, Teddy's law work suffered as a result.

His father was not amused.

"Stop all this frivolous socialising at once," he demanded.

That year, instead of accompanying the rest of the family to Cornwall for their annual summer holiday, my twenty-year old father elected to stay at home, ostensibly to study but, in fact, took the time to visit various theatrical agents and concert party managers in the popular seaside resorts along the South Coast. He had several auditions, lots of advice, a great deal of encouragement and the offer of a job the following season.

He couldn't wait.

On the 28th May [1901], two months after Teddy's twenty-first birthday ... Anne Cotton, died.

She was fifty-four years old.

After this tragic event things at home became intolerable for Teddy.

He felt decidedly uneasy about Mary Pascall's position in the house and the familiarity which seemed to be developing between her and his father.

It was time, he decided, to leave.

One can imagine the scene when he confronted his father with the news that he had been offered a part in a forthcoming show and had every intention of honouring the contract.

Frank Cotton had to face the fact that his eldest son was not only abandoning the respectable career picked out for him but was about to enter, what he considered to be, a life of undoubted unmitigated sin - the theatre.

He was horrified.

But although the battle raged for several hours, eventually he had to resign himself to the inevitable.

"Obviously, I cannot stop you taking this disastrous step." he said.

"All I ask, therefore, is that you cease to bring disgrace on the family by the use of our well respected name."

Although Teddy did not agree with these old-fashioned sentiments, he said he would adopt a stage name.

And so Edward Frank Cotton, solicitor-to-be, was no more.

Edward Elliott, writer, entertainer and producer had arrived.

Why Elliott?

No particular reason, other than Edward Elliott had a nice ring to it and would, he decided, look good up in lights.

He was right

For the next few years 'living out of a suitcase' took on a whole new meaning for Teddy.

During that time he appeared on stage in just about every city and provincial town in the British Isles and, although packing, catching trains and finding decent digs became a way of life, he never once regretted his decision to abandon his law career and enter the world of the theatre.

Walter George, the proprietor of the Colonial Concert Party, was an astute businessman.

Teddy's original audition had included a couple of humorous monologues he had written himself and Mr. George was quick to see the value of an Artiste/Writer - two for the price of one. And so, although the contract stated he was to be engaged as a 'Ventriloquial Humorist' at a weekly salary of seven pounds (a huge sum in those days) a rather cunning clause was added as follows: "The Management retain to themselves the absolute right to material written by and used by the Artiste during the period of engagement."

This meant that for the next three years Teddy was unable to sell any of his work and would certainly not be paid for any original material used in the show. It didn't bother him much, however, because he had very little time to devote to anything other than perfecting his stage act and entertaining the lovely ladies in his immediate theatrical circle of friends.

He was having a wonderful time.

Of course, anything he did write was sent to his sister and published under her name which, by the way, had now also been changed to May Elliott.

In the theatrical contract Teddy signed Rule 3 stated [that] “The Artiste shall act as required, take part in all concerted numbers, part songs, choruses, dance and general stage business as may be arranged or required.” [This] meant simply there were to be no 'prima donnas' in the company. Everyone had to be willing and capable of doing anything in the performing line required of them, with hefty fines imposed for shirking such duties.

Obviously, there was no Actors' Equity in those days.

All this was wonderful training for Teddy, who was thankful his sister had dragged him along to those music and singing lessons. Previously, of course, he had concentrated solely on his own specialised act which, by the way, he had now perfected to include a new 'partner'. This was Sunshine James.

A mass of strings and movable parts, S.J as he was called, was created by Jordan's, a London Theatrical Prop firm.

I'll leave it to the theatre critics to describe the act:

Manchester Guardian

Perhaps the best item is demonstrated by the Ventriloquial art by Mr. Edward Elliott. With bright-looking doll 'Sunshine James' Mr. Elliott discourses in interesting vein. In fact, so lifelike is the chatter, deportment and manipulation of this automaton, who even resorts to puffing a cigarette and shedding tears, it can hardly be realised that he is but a mechanical representation of a human. Mr. Elliott had a more complete understanding of his art and his work is of a type more refined and convincing than that of any such performance seen hitherto.

The critics were usually kind to Teddy. Some even raved:

Daily News

There have always been a lot of so-called Ventriloquists around who simply speak out of a half closed mouth, hold a puppet up close and manipulate it in such a way that the words appear to come from it. Comparing them with Edward Elliott would be like comparing a bath tub singer with a fully trained operatic tenor. Mr. Elliott is certainly one of the finest artistes of the present day, being original, spontaneous and clever, and his reception was tremendous and well deserved.

At the end of the three years [in 1904], although offered double salary, Teddy decided not to renew his contract with Walter George.

With his business training, plus the ability to write original material, he thought it would be a good idea, and certainly more profitable, to form his own Concert Party.

He advertised in the Stage, held auditions and eventually got together a group of enthusiastic entertainers willing to take a chance on a new boy who, through his own theatrical reputation and a reliable agent, had managed to obtain bookings for the coming season.

And so, at the age of 24, Teddy became the proprietor of the **Pronouns Concert Party**. That year the Stage ran an item about the Elliotts, noting that the sister May was one of the few lady writers of Concert Party and Music Hall material and that brother Edward was not only one of the youngest Actor/Managers in the business but also a prolific writer of plays and sketches.

The show was a great success wherever it appeared and toured for several years.

Fortunately, the South Pier Theatre in Lowestoft was the venue for the 1908 season. Had there not been a mix-up in bookings, the Pronouns would have appeared in Bournemouth that year and my parents would never have met.

[In Lowestoft, East England, Edward Elliott met and fell in love with Florrie Tench, whom he married in 1911.]

The Smart Set Revue that Teddy had written [1911] proved such a success Walter George planned to take the show on an extended overseas tour. As a large part of a Revue involved amusing satire on local customs and events, Mr George realised how desperately he needed a clever on the spot writer. Teddy was offered a part in the show at a very large salary indeed.

As a responsible, newly engaged man, Teddy had already decided to put a travelling manager in charge of his Pronouns Company, concentrate on writing and settle down.

The Smart Set wanted Edward Elliott, and Edward Elliott wanted a partnership in the Company.

The first overseas performance of the Smart Set took place at the Grand Theatre in Blomfontein on 13 October, 1911, and from there the company appeared in theatres all over South Africa and Rhodesia.

Teddy was well and truly fulfilling his childhood ambition to 'make the people laugh'.

Once again I'll leave it to the critics to describe the show:

Johannesburg Sunday Times

The star of the show (with due apologies to other cast members who are all first rate) is undoubtedly Edward Elliott. In the first portion of the programme he brought the house down with his up to date topical song 'Little by Little' and the delighted audience absolutely insisted on encore after encore .

The Cape Mercury

Edward Elliott had no need for the comic trappings - he simply gets on to the stage and genuinely amuses the people with his clever, sophisticated wit, and if I may judge from the laughter and applause I may say that the whole audience enjoyed him quite as well as I did.

Port Elizabeth Herald

Not only are the 'Set' Smart - they are brilliantly funny, all due, I'm told, to the clever pen of the original sketches and songs of Edward Elliott. He has a creative faculty which is the highest form of genius.

Diamonds Fields Advertiser

As well as being the cleverest Ventriloquist we have ever seen, Edward Elliott writes all the hilarious sketches and songs for the show. Many artistes who make a speciality of topical songs rely upon a certain amount of vulgarity to raise a laugh. Not so Mr Elliott who, in common with every one of his specially picked fellow artistes - never sings a doubtful line.

Rand Daily Mail

So popular is the Smart Set's master of satire with his 'Little by Little' number, Edward Elliott has now written and will produce at the Bijou Theatre an entirely new and original Revue on the happenings of the day entitled P.O. Box OOO Jo'berg. What an amazing man. What an imagination he must have to produce such witty and topical Revues ... Standing room only will greet this one I'm sure.

How did he find the time? Today a satirical TV show would employ several writers all working flat out for hours on end.

Teddy was appearing on stage six evenings a week plus matinees. As a partner in the Company he also had business commitments, advance publicity and booking problems to contend with so how on earth he was able to write up to ten encore verses for his Little by Little number, and then come up with a 'New Revue on the Happenings of the Day' was amazing.

I imagine the first thing he had to do on arriving in a new town was contact the editor of the daily newspaper and be briefed on the political and topical goings-on in that particular part of the world. Then he had to rush to the hotel and write and rehearse the material for the show and that evening would make the audience laugh by referring to a deadly contentious matter and making fun of it.

In Johannesburg, for instance, it would be this:

*The folk in this town, I hear, drink quite a lot.
To get a new system, oh my - how you try,
At present you're getting your water supply -
Little by little and bit by bit.
Turn on the taps of the bath as you sit
Trying to wash as the water goes drip
Little by little and bit by bit*

As the following critic wrote:

South African Review

Edward Elliott writes nearly all the numbers performed by the Smart Set and probably more of his work is utilised by concert parties and others than that of any other writer. His topical songs strung together at a moment's notice on the flimsiest information touch the high water mark of excellence.

The opening day for the new show was Monday 5th May, 1912, and as can be seen by the programme, a new member of the Smart Set, Miss Florrie Elliott, made her debut in the role of a (fortunately) non-singing Madam Butterfly.

Some of the accommodations booked for them left a lot to be desired, as can be judged by the following poem Elliott wrote:

To the Manager of a Bad Hotel

*Heaven made earth and those that there dwell,
But the Devil invented the Bad Hotel.
Your greedy face smiles when we cross your door
As you think of the illgotten gains in store.
Already we've recognised the smell
Of the dirt and damp of a Bad Hotel
We enter the bedroom with frightened stare
As we know full well what ye harbour there.
The food is disgusting, we know it well
It's always the same at the Bad Hotel
From watery soup and a greasy stew
To fish with a sort of yellowish hue.
A lumpy custard and vinegary wine
And cheese even half starved mice would decline.
We try to sleep in that rock hard bed
And listen to snores from next door instead
We toss and turn in that airless cell
And curse you for running a Bad Hotel.*

*You hand us the bill the following day
And ruined and broken we creep away,
So when to the lions at last you're thrown
We'll laugh as the Evil One claims his own,
And cherish the thought of you down in Hell
As guest of Mine Host in a Bad Hotel.*

Just before they left the country, as a final gesture, Teddy not only managed to get the poem printed in most of the daily newspapers, but sent a copy to all the managers of the Bad Hotels encountered during the tour.

Some people never recognise themselves, however, and the manager of the Victoria Hotel in Pretoria wrote in reply:

“Thank you for sending me a copy of that very excellent skit on the bad managers of a Bad Hotel. I take it by your kind gesture that you honour me with exemption from that army of scalliwags, and it has caused us all a great deal of laughter.”

At the bottom of this letter Teddy noted with amusement: One of the worst Bad Hotels in South Africa.'

The tour continued without a break, for even on the three weeks sea voyage on board *S.S. Marathon*, the Smart Set gave performances all the way to Australia.

They arrived there on 7th December, 1912 and staged their first show the following day at the Follies Theatre at St. Kilda in Melbourne.

The Melbourne Advertiser

In Australia's first ever Revue, Mr. Edward Elliott has written and produced the finest piece of original work yet seen on the Australian stage. It is a satire on everything and everyone in the public eye, from the opening of the Federal City Council buying the St. Kilda baths. All well known stage favourites and political persons appeared in caricature. Mr. Edward Elliott has no less than fifteen changes, his Egyptian Messenger impersonation being the funniest and the H.B. Irving the cleverest. From start to finish it caused one long uproar of laughter and applause. A brilliant production admirably acted.

From reading the Elliott press cutting books, it's interesting to see the way Teddy was developing as an original comedian. Writing his own material to suit his own particular style was a great advantage and his 'gloom and doom' type characters - totally different from the Resident Comedian, Walter George - obviously appealed to a lot of people if the following comments are anything to go by:

Western Australian Times

I had to see the show again. I couldn't believe a comedian could be so good. Edward Elliott's work as a broken-down waiter is a gem of unforced humour, and artistic triumph and a dream of comedy joy.

Critics are not always kind and the following must have caused a few raised eyebrows.

Perth Sunday Times

The ventriloqual and Revue comedian of the Smart Set was the star of the show. The others were just Also Rans.

Ouch!

In spite of such remarks there was apparently no ill-feeling between the two partners for Walter George was a happy-go-lucky sort of character who realised only too well the valuable work Teddy was doing to make the tour a financial success. The Revues were always popular, and "Standing Room Only" was the order of the day in most of the towns visited during the Australian tour, which ended in Sydney. On 7th June 1913 they sailed to New Zealand aboard the *S.S. Wimmera*.

Of course, as soon as they set foot in New Zealand Teddy was off to the New Zealand Herald office to gather all the low-down on current political and local affairs to incorporate into his 'New Zealand Revue' which opened at the Concert Chamber, Auckland Town Hall on June 14th, 1913.

From the script of the satire we learn all sorts of controversial things were going on in the country at that time which were made fun of in the approved manner and, after seeing the show, the New Zealand Herald suggested that the City of Auckland should change its motto from 'Keep your city clean' to Edward Elliott's motto of 'Keep your city laughing.'

After a six months' tour of the North and South Islands, the company did several shows in Tasmania before finishing the tour in Melbourne. On March 14 they sailed on the French ship *Ville de la Ciotat* back to England via India.

The honeymoon was finally coming to an end.

They arrived home just in time for the First World War. Not only was this dubious timing but, instead of settling down to write as planned, Teddy was called up to entertain the troops.

This he did with his company, the Pronouns.

Once again travelling from one town to another was the order of the day only, instead of seaside resorts and theatres, now it was military hospitals and army camps.

On 3rd August, 1918, in Cheltenham, Joan Ann Elliott was born.

As a new father Teddy did actually take the time to settle down and write but was still the proprietor of the Pronouns which involved some travel. For the main part, however, they were resident performers at a theatre in Burnham-on-Sea, enabling the Elliott family to rent a house in the town.

In 1920 he was commissioned to write a new musical show for the Humphrey Bishop Company which was overseas at the time on a much publicised world tour with J.C. Williamson. Entitled *Past, Present and Future*, the work was duly sent to Humphrey

Bishop, who promptly showed his approval by sending a telegram to Teddy offering him a part in the show.

Although it was eleven years since he last performed in Australia, Teddy was treated like an old friend by critics and theatre-goers alike. Happily relieved of the responsibility of management this time, he was still writing (and being paid for) original material for the show.

In Perth, for instance, there was standing room only for the special gala performance at the Olympia in honour of the Australian and Western Australian Cricket teams who were present to see what the press described as “Edward Elliott's clever comedy *The Cricket Team -England v Australia* which was so funny it created a furore on Saturday night.”

Quickly he settled into the hectic routine of the Humphrey Bishop Company and appeared to be impressed by the quality and size of the show.

He wrote to May in April, 1921:

It's a fine show and must be a huge salary list. Besides top artistes they carry a conductor, jazz drummer, first violin, pianist (the rest of the orchestra made up locally) stage carpenter, wardrobe mistress, advance agent and business manager. Costumes magnificent. Only booked in biggest and best theatres.

My father was a very happy man.

After seven years of marriage with no children he now [in 1921] had two daughters and a wife he adored. The tour, too, was a great success.

There were some memorable moments. Perhaps the most publicised was the Command Performance at Adelaide's Theatre Royal attended by the Governor General, Premier, several Ministers and their wives and the new and retiring Lord Mayors. It was reported in newspapers throughout Australia and England:

Edward Elliott caused quite a sensation at the Theatre Royal on Saturday night. His humorous, but deeply sentimental appeal to His Excellency the Governor General, who was in one of the boxes with Lady Weigall, not to go back to London was the means of Sir Archibald being accorded one the most spontaneous and moving ovations he has received since arriving in South Australia.

No doubt Sir Archibald half expected that his retirement would be the subject of a comic jest, but the reference in verse coming from the living doll Sunshine James, cleverly manipulated by Edward Elliott, had dignity and feeling in it. The verses caused a remarkable demonstration. The audience broke into a ripple of handclapping which rose to a resounding and sustained boom. His Excellency and Lady Weigall were obviously much touched and impressed by this signal tribute to the esteem in which they were held and to the expression of regret felt regarding their all too early departure.

Sir Archibald was, in fact, so moved that after the show he went back stage to invite Humphrey Bishop and my mother and father to lunch at Government House the following day. It was during the soup course Lady Weigall mentioned how disappointed her young daughter Priscilla was not to have seen the famous Sunshine James, a remark which prompted my father to say "I'll bring him along to entertain the children at her party if you like."

This offer was accepted with great enthusiasm, for a number of children had been invited to the much publicised party which was to be one of the Viceregal 'goodbye' ceremonies early in the New Year, and it was the outstanding success of the entertainment he provided on that day which launched my father into one of the most ambitious projects of his career.

Over the years he had devoted a lot of time and energy to charity work in the form of events known as the Sunshine James Birthday Parties. This time, however, it was going to be a BIG party involving an enormous amount of organisation and effort.

The Sunshine James Birthday Party at the Exhibition Grounds on Saturday was the biggest thing of its kind ever attempted anywhere in the world. Over 7000 children and parents were entertained.

Can't you imagine the scene?

The whole thing started with great ceremony with the Lord Mayor and other dignitaries being welcomed by my father and the rest of the Company. The whole group was escorted through the grounds by the Town Band, through a guard of honour and on to the stage where Sunshine James was introduced.

Then came the highlight of the day when a huge pie was wheeled on to the stage. This was duly opened and out flew four and twenty colourful Australian birds which had been released on cue by "Several beautiful little girls who also popped out of the pie and danced gracefully to the music of Mr Jack Fewster's band."

The leading light in the pie episode, by the way, was none other than little Joan Elliott - making her first stage appearance at the age of four - and, until it was destroyed in an air raid in 1941, we had a movie to prove it.

The entire Party, you see, was made into a film entitled *The Biggest Children's Party in the World* and ran in cinemas throughout Australia. As organiser, my father was presented with a copy.

It is extremely sad this historical film was later destroyed, as some of the shots showed the four of us together with Joan and I munching away on Alaska Ice-creams and proudly wearing our S.J.S.S. badges to prove we were fully paid up members of the Sunshine James Secret Society. This was yet another of my imaginative father's fund-raising ideas which involved a great deal of hard work but produced large amounts for charity and endeared him to the public world wide.

I'm not sure what happened to the management of the company during the last few months of the Australian tour but, according to the Theatre & Motion Picture Magazine, it was my father who popped over to Auckland in October 1923 to arrange the New Zealand tour.

During their previous tour with the Smart Set my parents had met Lois and Billy Duff and corresponded with them over the years. Billy was the J.C. Williamson representative in New Zealand and had found an apartment for the Elliott family to stay during the season at His Majesty's Theatre in Queen Street, Auckland.

Having found a reliable Nanny to look after me, as well as a small private school which five year old Joan attended, the two ladies were able to go out and about and enjoy themselves. The men also got on well and had long discussions on their future involvement in the new movie industry. Deciding this was something they would both enjoy, they made plans to form a partnership at the end of the tour with the idea of making comedy films in England.

Sadly this was not to be.

Eventually the time came to leave the warmer climate of Auckland for a five week season in the Capital. And so I spent my third birthday backstage at the Tivoli Theatre in Wellington.

The past few months had been an exhausting time for my father who had been busy writing an entirely new show. This was *The Gnat*.

The Dominion

[*The Gnat*] is one of the funniest, wittiest and most clever plays ever
seen in this country. Edward Elliott at his brilliant best in fact.

In addition to this he was still appearing on stage six nights a week plus matinees and was, frankly, exhausted.

It was a bitterly cold winter that year of 1924 and the Wellington winds blew ferociously for days on end creating ice box conditions in the theatre's draughty old dressing rooms.

Inevitably, my father caught a chill.

Although my mother pleaded with him not to go to the theatre that night, the traditional *The Show Must Go On* attitude prevailed and, of course, he went.

It was certainly not obvious to the audience that he was ill, but at the end of the performance my father collapsed and was taken to Wellington Hospital.

Two days later, on 5th August 1924, my father, Edward Elliott, died.

He was forty-four years old.