

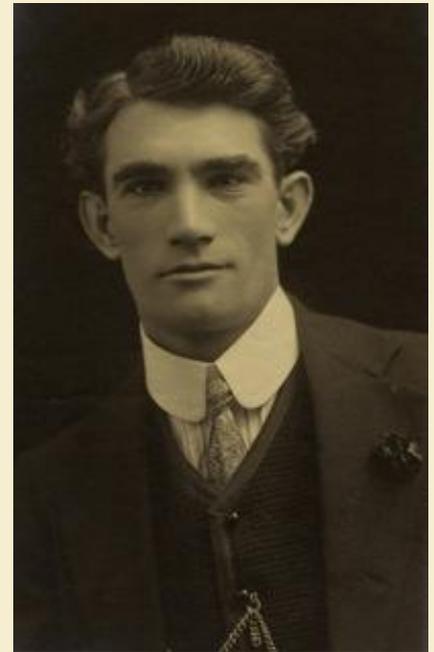
TOM DAWSON

(1874-1916) Tom Dawson initially worked as a journalist before turning to the variety stage, first as a dancer and later as a comedian. Best known for his comedy songs, Dawson was largely associated with the Tivoli circuit between 1904 and 1913 and reportedly had over 200 song successes. He was killed on active duty with the A.I. F. in 1916.

Thomas Besley (aka Tom Dawson) was born in Newport, Wales, the eldest son of Mr and Mrs Francis Besley (originally of Alberton). The family, which included siblings Arthur, Charlie, Phillip, Frank, Eliza and Edith, came to Australia when the children were still young and settled in Adelaide. In 1888 Dawson began working as a journalist with the Adelaide *Advertiser*, working out of the paper's Port Adelaide office, before switching to photography. During his leisure time he learned to dance and later, while visiting Sydney, was invited to join a pierrot company which was then playing a season at Manly.

Dawson developed his comic talents in Western Australia with a minstrel company, and became an endman during a season at Perth's Cremorne Gardens in the late 1890s. While his talents was undeniably present at this early stage of his career, at least one critic was of the opinion that Dawson needed to find his own feet, so to speak in the highly competitive variety industry. Writing in the *West Australian Sunday Times* in 1898, the journalist records:

Mr Tom Dawson, who has lately been seen at one of the Fremantle Halls, is an eccentric dancer of no mean ability, and was one of a numerous and powerful combination [which] visited Broken Hill to open the Palace Theatre there. He is a great admirer of Mr John Coleman, and has acquired many of his characteristic steps. Not infrequently he receives all the applause for "the Undertaker," "I Wonder if He'll Write Me a Letter," and other songs generally identified with Coleman, that the latter artists could possibly desire for himself. Imitation, we are told, is the sincerest flattery, and as Coleman has perforce been copied by so many he should feel gratified that the vile abortion presented by his numerous imitators is not perpetrated by Dawson when he uses his particular steps (31 July 1898, 7).



Source: www.stagewhispers.com.au



Source: National Library of Australia

While touring with the Flying Jordans he began to develop his signature comedy song act. According to his obituary, published in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, Dawson "appeared in practically all the cities of the Commonwealth with the Flying Jordans ("Tom Dawson Killed," 9). In 1903 Dawson was invited to appear as the baron in Tom Perman's Melbourne production of *Red Riding Hood*. Among the other artists engaged were Harry Shine (as the dame), Bella Perman, Will Perman and Lulu Eugene. When Shine fell ill Dawson took over his role even though he'd never played the dame before. His performance so impressed Harry Rickards the night he saw the production that the entrepreneur immediately offered Dawson a contract. That association, which began in early 1904 ended up running without a break for 10 years - an achievement that very few artists were ever able to manage (EP: 30 Sept. 1916, 11). What was also unusual was for that entire period Dawson was employed effectively fulltime, a rather unusual situation for the average vaudevillian. In her entry on Dawson in the *History of Australian Theatre* (HAT) website, Leanne Richards provides an uncited reference relating Dawson's reputation for generosity:

He was known as a generous and kind hearted man with a keen sense of duty and honour. On pay days at the Tivoli, a crowd of unfortunates would gather outside the office door waiting for Tom to distribute money to his regular pensioners. On another occasion, he paid for the burial of a young girl from an Adelaide bar he frequented. Despite only having a casual acquaintance with her, he ensured that she was interred next to her mother in Waverly cemetery in Sydney (n. pag.).

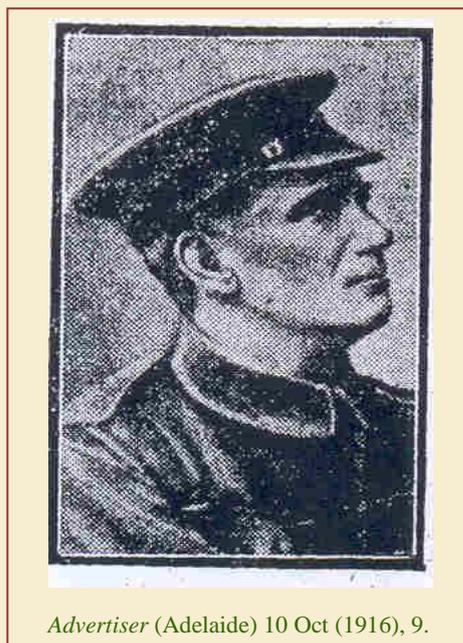
Between 1904 and 1913, Dawson reportedly had more than 200 song successes on the Tivoli circuit. A number of these were published with his name as the originator (including "You Wouldn't Believe, "There! That's My Nasty Temper" and "I'd Rather Have a Boiled Egg"). In later years a theatre critic wrote of Dawson and Fred Bluett, who in the early 1900s were considered to be among the top comedians under long-term contract to Harry Rickards:

When Bluett first appeared under the Rickards management he had a formidable rival in the late Tom Dawson... The quaintness of Tom Dawson's work was its hallmark, and it contrasted so markedly with the bubbling humour of Bluett as to keep patrons of the playhouse in constant doubt as to which was the better entertainer of the two. Unfortunately, and to the disadvantage of the Australian vaudeville stage, the grim old umpire has set at rest any doubts for the future on that score, and Dawson sleeps far afield with other Australians he helped to entertain in the not too distant past (HM: 20 Feb. 1917, 7).

In 1913 Dawson left Australia to try his luck in Great Britain, returning to Australia some two years later. Not long after arriving back in Australia he made the decision to enlist in the Australian Imperial Forces (A.I.F.). At the time of his enlistment a Sydney paper wrote of him: "He is Australia's very own comedian, who has learnt all he knows in Australia and forced himself to the front by sheer merit, without any help from outside reputation" (ctd. "Tom Dawson Killed, 9).

Not long after arriving back in Australia in 1915, after two years back in the UK, Dawson enlisted with the A.I.F. He did not leave for Europe immediately after completing his basic training, as the military saw further benefit in using his celebrity to inspire further enlistments by attending charity events and various official activities. He was also able to continue working as a professional vaudeville artist during this period, with this unusual situation being sanctioned by the government and A.I.F. no doubt as a means of drumming up more patriotic sentiment within the Sydney community.

After being shipped out of Australia, Dawson was initially sent to Egypt, where he continued performing at any opportunity. A number of sources report that he was involved in various entertainments in Cairo while on leave. He even appeared in a moving picture made vaudevillian Harry Leeds, who was there with his partner Trixie La Mar as part of an entertainment unit. According to the *Queenslander* the film was called *Tuesday the Seventh* (29 June 1918, 19). The *Sunday Times* (Perth) published a rather unflattering par in its 25 June 1916 edition which records that Dawson along with Danny Durant and "another alleged comedian named Jack Lee" were currently "busking in a fifth rate variety show in Cairo" (20). Whether Dawson saw any action in Egypt is unclear. he was later sent to France, however, and it was there that he was killed charging a German machine-gun emplacement on 19 July 1916. One of his officers later recalled the lead-up to the charge and how Dawson fell:



I knew him well in Egypt. He was the life and soul of entertainments got up for the Red Cross, and the cheer up the boys. When we were in the desert he was the same bright old spirit, and did a lot to cheer everyone. He fell in an attack we made a few days ago. Just before our time for jumping the parapet arrived I saw him The Bosches [sic] were sending in some big ones, and things were only middling. "Well Tom," I said. "How is it now?" "Well," said Tom, with his quaint smile. "I'd rather have a boiled egg - you will remember his old song. I passed Tom's remark along the line, and it relieved the tension quite a lot. We hopped over and I found Tom coming along on my right as cool and determined as a man could be. The machine gun fire was a hot as most enthusiast would care about, and Tom and the boy on my left went down in the same instant. Our advance was checked there so I got Tom under as good cover as was available. He was shot in the lower part of the body and I felt from the first that he was done. I think he knew it himself but all the same he kept brave and patient, though he suffered a good deal, I'm afraid. We lay out in No man's Land all night and in the morning I had to leave him. It was impossible for me to carry him alone, and there was no one there to help me. He could not bear to be shifted and there was a small river to cross. "Goodbye, Sir! God bless you," said old Tom as we shook hands. I crawled back under machine gun fire and snipers' bullets and managed to reach our lines again. AS soon as it was possible stretcher-bearers brought him in. He was still living but died almost immediately. In his life as a soldier Tom Dawson did fine service to the Australian army by devoting his gifts to the pleasure and encouragement of his comrades, he died like a hero - an honour to the theatrical profession and the land of his birth ("Tom Dawson Killed, 9).¹

¹ See "Historical Notes and Corrections" below regarding "I'd Rather Have a Boiled Egg."

POPULAR COMEDIAN DIES OF WOUNDS

TOM DAWSON.

CHARGING THE GERMANS.

Melbourne, Sept. 20.

A letter has been received in Melbourne from an officer in France, stating that Tom Dawson, the comedian, who was reported missing, died from a bullet wound in the body, received in a charge against the Germans.

(Many people on the goldfields will have happy memories of the late Tom Dawson. He appeared with Rickards' Tivoli Vaudeville Co. at the Cremorne Theatre).

Kalgoorlie Western Argus 26 Sept. (1916), 30.

Aged 42 at his death, Dawson was survived by his wife, Emma, who at the time of his death was living in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond. Such was his reputation that newspapers all around the country reported on his passing. His brothers and sisters, Arthur, Charlie, Phillip, Frank, Eliza and Edith published the following notice in the *Advertiser* (Adelaide) on the first anniversary of his death:

In loving memory of our sear brother, Private Tom Dawson, who left the footlights at his country's call, and was killed in action in France sometime in July 1916...

Far away from those who loved him,
Comrades laid him down to rest,
A noble hero true and brave,
Peacefully sleeping in a soldier's grave.
There is one link death cannot sever,
Love's remembrance lives forever,
He was only a private in battle
Just a part of the great rank and file
Yet the sad hearts at home still remember
The day he left them with a smile
(19 July 1917, 4)

Almost a year after his death the industry came together in support of his widow, holding a matinee benefit at Melbourne's Theatre Royal on 22 May 1917. The *Argus* records that "practically every artists in Melbourne volunteered their services," resulting in a "most attractive bill." Included were all the principals then engaged by J. C. Williamson's at Her Majesty's Theatre; J. and N. Tait's New Musical Comedy Company; the Fullers' Bunyip pantomime company, along with their Bijou and Palace theatre companies; and the Fisk Jubilee Singers (21 May 1917, 4). The loss of Dawson was felt strongly by his friends and the industry. The Green Room Club and friends like William Maher, published memoriam notices for him for several years following his death. Maher's reads: "In memory of friend Tom Dawson, for ten years leading comedian Harry Rickards' Tivoli circuit, fell on the battlefield, France July 19, 1916. "A fellow of infinite jest; May his soul rest in peace" (ARG: 19 July 1920, 1).

DAWSON.—To the memory of our old member, Tom Dawson, who was killed fighting in action in France 19th July, 1916. (Inserted by his old pals, Green Room Club.)

Argus 20 July (1918), 13

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. The *History of Australian Theatre* (HAT) website incorrectly records that Dawson's Tivoli career saw him perform as an "endman." Harry Rickards had begun to fade the minstrel show and, in particular the minstrel semi-circle from his entertainments in the early to mid 1890s. While blackface performers still appeared on the Tivoli stage, notably Will Whitburn, the appearance of endmen from the 1890s onwards from confined only to very occasional minstrel revivals.
2. Dawson enlisted to serve in the Australian Imperial Forces (A.I.F.) during a State government sponsored appeal for recruits that ran over several days in late October 1915. The rally was held at Martin Place (Sydney), and included a 200-strong march by men in military formation, a police band playing patriotic music and performances by several female singers who presented additional patriotic songs - including "There's a Land" and "Off to the Front." The same article, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (28 Oct. 1915, 8) reported on Dawson's part in the proceedings:

A PATRIOTIC COMEDIAN.

There was something in the nature of a "sensation" when Tom Dawson walked to the platform and gave his name and age. "What is your occupation?" asked the recruiting sergeant. "Put me down as an alleged comedian," replied the man who has so often made the Tivoli rock with laughter. Mrs. Black pinned a red, white, and blue badge on the coat of the new recruit, and before he had time to realise what was happening he was gently pushed to the speaking end of the platform.

"Tom Dawson has joined the fighting boys," said Mr. Black, "and for the encouragement of others he will now say a few words. Give him a cheer—he deserves one."

The patriotic comedian said he would rather sing a comic song than make a speech. (Laughter.) Having done the deed he would tell them that he had made up his mind that all able-bodied men should go and do a little bit to help along the cause of humanity while fighting for the British Empire. (Cheers.) He had no children; but he had a wife. He wired to his wife, telling her that he was about to enlist. He asked, "Will I go or stay?" His wife telegraphed that morning the deciding word, "Go." (Cheers.)

3. Over (a short period of) time the story about Dawson quoting the title of his famous song "I'd Rather Have a Boiled Egg" prior to being killed was changed temporally. In this respect a number of sources claimed that these were among the last words he spoke, as the following par from Perth's *Sunday Times* (12 Nov. 1916, 24) indicates:

The late Tom Dawson was cheerful to the last even after his dose of seven shrapnel-bullet wounds. Asked just before he died if he'd like what is practically a dope to ease his pain he shook his head wearily. "No," he said, "I'd rather have a hard-boiled egg." The latter was one of Tom's best-known songs.

FURTHER REFERENCE

"[Patriotic Comedian, A.](#)" SMH: 28 Oct. (1915), 8.

"[Theatrical Notes.](#)" STP: 31 July (1898), 7.

Richards, Leanne. "[Tom Dawson - Comedian.](#)" *HAT: History of Australian Theatre* (sighted 6/6/2012)

"[Tom Dawson Killed.](#)" AA: 10 Oct. (1916), 9.

See also:

ARG: 7 Sept (1916), 8.

BM: 30 Oct. (1915), 6 • BM: 4 Apr. (1918), 4.

EP: 30 Sept. (1916), 11.

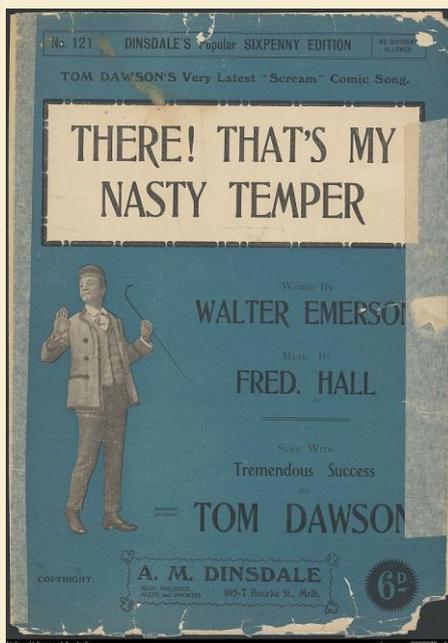
HM: 20 Feb. (1917), 7.

MA: 23 Feb. (1918), 6.

OW: 30 Dec. (1903), 31.

QLD: 29 June (1918), 19

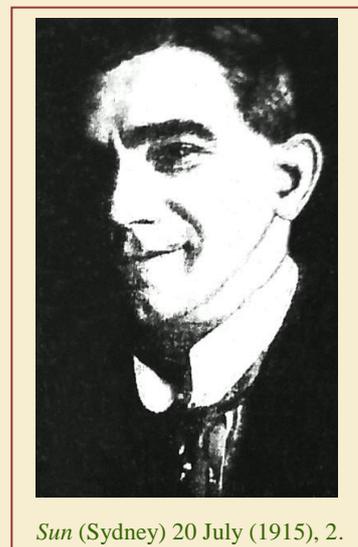
STP: 25 June (1916), 20.



Source: National Library of Australia



Sunday Times (Perth) 28 Jan. (1917), 8.



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