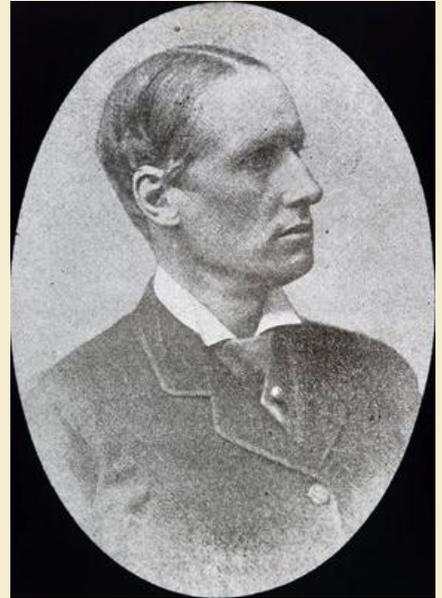


SIR WILLIAM ROBINSON

William Robinson spent most of his career as an administrator in the Colonial Office, including three terms as Governor of Western Australia. In addition to his public service career Robinson also found success as a composer of patriotic and sentimental ballads, notably "Unfurl the Flag." In 1894 he collaborated with Francis Hart on the operetta, *Predatoras* (aka *The Handsome Ransom*), which was staged in both Perth and Melbourne. He returned to England in 1895 following his final term as Western Australian Governor.

The fifth son of British Admiral Hercules Robinson and Frances Elizabeth Wood, of Rosmead, Westmeath (Ireland), and the younger brother of Sir Hercules George Robinson (First Baron Rosmead), the governor of Hong Kong between 1859 and 1865, Sir William Cleaver Francis Robinson was born at his family's home in Rosmead in 1834. In 1858, after having completed his education at Sandhurst, he entered into the service of the Colonial Office. A keen musician, Robinson also wrote part songs and pieces for military bands (under the nom de plume Owen Hope) during his early career in London. One of his first significant appointments was as private secretary to his brother (then Lieutenant Governor of the Caribbean island of St Kitts). Robinson married in 1862 and four years later was appointed Governor of the Falkland Islands. This was followed in 1873 by his appointment as Governor of Prince Edward Island. In 1873 he was created a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG), and subsequently made Governor of Western Australia. Robinson served three terms in this position (1875-77, 1880-83 and 1890-95). He was knighted in 1877, and between 1883 and 1889 undertook the duties of Governor of South Australia, and briefly acted as Governor of Victoria in 1889. His services to the crown also saw him awarded a GCMG in 1887.



Source: State Library of Western Australia

A leading patron of the arts during his time in Australia, Robinson gave his time to numerous musical and literary societies including the Perth Musical Union (1892), the Adelaide Quartet Club (1883-1886) and the Melbourne Metropolitan Liedertafel (1883). He lent his support to a number of composers and writers - notably Maurice Heuzenroeder, Julius Hertz, G. W. L. Marshall-Hall, Francis Hart, and along with Sir Thomas Elder, headed the list of subscribers supporting the financial operations of Adelaide University's Chair of Music during its first five years (it later became the Elder Conservatorium).

Although largely remembered today for his public service and political career, Robinson was in fact an accomplished musician and composer who found a good deal of success, mostly in the area of ballads and popular song styles. A *West Australian* music critic records, for example: "Sir William Robinson has for many years been among the popular song writers of the day, and his compositions stamp him as a writer of originality and exceptional musical merit." The critic goes on to note that among his works Robinson had "composed several part-songs, characterised by melodic charm and excellent vocal part-writing, and [that] his setting of 'Brief Life is Here Our Portion' [was] deservedly one of the most popular of modern hymns on account of its melodiousness and expansiveness" (19 Jan. 1894, 3). While some degree of hyperbole may be present in the reviews - possibly due to Robinson's position as governor - there can be no doubting the large sales of sheet music that some of his compositions garnered. 'Remember Me No More' is said, for example, to have sold in excess of 30-40,000 copies. Robinson's most popular composition in the Australian colonies, however, was the patriotic, "Unfurl the Flag," which not only sold tens of thousands of copies but was a favourite on both the variety and dramatic stages for many years. It is also known to have been incorporated into such productions as Harry W. Emmet's pantomime, *Sinbad the Sailor*, staged in Melbourne in 1884 by George Rignold and Christine Darrell (aka Mrs George Darrell) later performed it too much acclaim as Babs Berkeley in her husband's 1891 Melbourne revival of *The Sunny South*. That same year a series of waltzes under the title of "Valse," drew much praise from the *Age's* music critic who wrote:

The composer's well-known attainments as a musician renders it unnecessary to say anything as to the technical correctness of this set of waltzes, which have in a high degree the qualities of grace and charm of melody whereby his numerous songs are distinguished. We shall be surprised if this, which is perhaps his first attempt at dance music, does not speedily attain a popularity equal to that achieved by his successful efforts in the line to which he has hitherto principally devoted himself (28 Mar. 1891, 15).

Other songs known to have been composed by Robinson include: 'Thou Art My Soul' (a great favourite of English singer Charles Santley, who sang it with considerable success in Melbourne), "I Love Thee So" and "The Post's Last

Dream" (both with lyrics by Gilbert Parker), and "Rouse Thee West'ralia" (1890), a proclamation song with lyrics by Henry E. Clay. Two songs "Imperfectus" (possibly "Imperfection") and "My Rose" are also recorded as having sold well in London (WA: 19 Jan. 1894, 3). A number of his songs were performed in Western Australia during his time as Governor – "Remember Me No More," "Thou Art My Soul" and "Imperfectus" being performed, for example, in Fremantle in 1894.

PRINCESS'S THEATRE
THIS (MONDAY) AFTERNOON,
THIS (MONDAY) AFTERNOON,
 At 2.30 p.m.
THE EVENT IN THE MUSICAL HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA,
 The occasion being the first time an opera will have been introduced to the world through its first production in Australia.
VICE-REGAL COMMAND,
 Under the Patronage and in the Presence of His Excellency
The EARL of HOPETOUN
 And the **COUNTESS of HOPETOUN,**
 When will be produced for the first time on any stage a new and original comic opera, entitled
PREDATOROS,
PREDATOROS,
PREDATOROS,
 Written by Francis Hart.
 Composed by Sir W. C. F. Robinson.
 The work will be mounted with all the completeness and care usual with Williamson and Musgrove.
PREDATOROS.
 Predatoros (a brigand chief) .. Mr. Wallace Brownlow
 Burglaros (his lieutenant) .. Mr. Sydney Deane
 Mr. Potts (a British tourist) .. Mr. George Lanri
 Angelina (his daughter) .. Miss Nellie Stewart
 Mrs. Potts .. Miss Elsie Cameron
 Guida (a decoy) .. Miss Florence Young
ACT I.—A Mountain Pass in Sicily.
ACT II.—Interior of a Cave.
SCENERY By GORDON.
PRICES as USUAL.
 Box plan at Allan's music warehouse.

Age 12 Nov. (1894), 8.

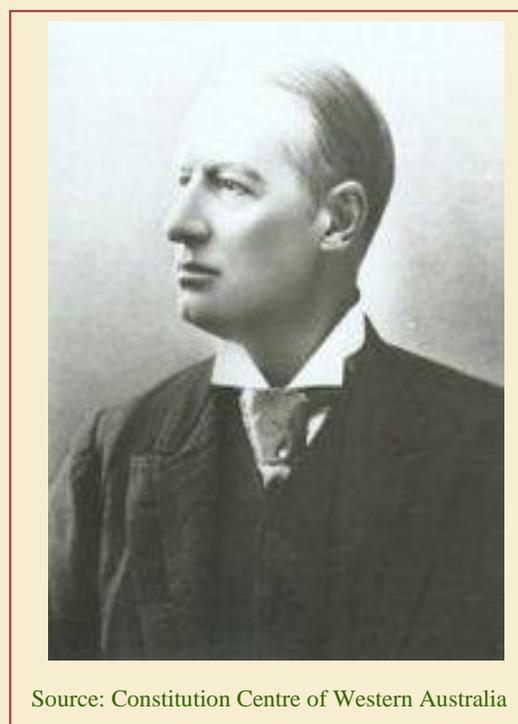
Robinson's his first foray into music theatre as principle composer was the operetta, *Predatoros*, co-written with librettist Francis Hart. It was given its premiere in January 1894 under the title *The Handsome Ransom* before some 250 invited guests at Government House in Perth. In an editorial preview the *West Australian* notes: "It is of somewhat unique interest that a Governor of a British Colony should be the composer of an opera and should present its first performance in the colony of which he is ruler, and for this reason alone to-night's entertainment will elicit very keen interest" (11 Jan. 1894, 4).

Following the Government House premiere the operetta was transferred to a hall in the city, where it was received with enthusiasm by the public. While holidaying in Melbourne during July of that year, Robinson responded to requests from friends to present the operetta in that city. That production, which featured Francis Hart in the role of Mr Potts, was mounted in the large salon of the Vienna Café without stage mounting, chorus or orchestra, and with about 100 guests in attendance. Given a new title, *Predatoros; Or The Brigand's Bride*, Robinson and Hart reworked the operetta, adding considerably to its length, a factor which according to the *Table Talk* critic allowed it to "fill the whole evening in its performance" (13 July 1894, 5). Several months later the work was re-staged (after some two months of rehearsal) under the auspices of J. C. Williamson and George Musgrove. Interestingly, the advertising for this production indicated that the operetta was being 'produced for the first time on any stage' (A: 12 Nov. 1894, 8).

In relation to the music, the Western Australian and Melbourne critics seem to have been divided. A drama critic from the Governor's home state wrote a glowing three column-long tribute, suggesting, for example, that "of the concerted and more dramatic parts of [Governor Robinson's] music, it may be generally said that [his] aim has evidently been to illustrate faithfully the situations created by the author of the libretto, and certainly the recitatives and the working up of the various situations are admirably done, and afford great scope to the performers" (WA: 19 Jan. 1894, 3). While the Melbourne critics generally found Robinson's score to be adequate, and occasionally charming, the *Argus* review proposed that in being "more in the style of the French opera comique than of the burlesque composition of the day... [the music was] not of a class to become quickly or widely popular" (13 Nov. 1894, 6). In agreement, the *Age* critic also suggested that the composer was "too much afraid of venturing boldly into the unknown and untried" (13 Nov. 1894, 6).

Sir William Robison retired from the Colonial Office in 1895, aged 61, having served almost forty years. Although some historians have perhaps rightly criticised him for being far too restrained and routine during his first term as Western Australia's governor (he in fact relinquished the position to take on the appointment of Governor of the Straits Settlement), Robinson's two later terms saw him become much more sympathetic and hands-on in helping the political aims of the constituents. His knowledge of the state and his remarkable administrative capabilities so impressed the Home authorities that they took much heed of his advice in helping set up the state's first legislative government. One of his more important administrative efforts was therefore undertaken shortly before his retirement, when after returning to England he helped pass Western Australia's Constitutional Bill through the Imperial Parliament. Robinson died in South Kensington, London, some two years into his retirement.

Eric Irvin indicates in his *Dictionary of Australian Theatre* that Robinson wrote at least one other serious music theatre work, an opera called *The Nut-Brown Maid* (248). Although possibly completed in 1896, the year before he died, the work was never staged.



Source: Constitution Centre of Western Australia

SEE ALSO

- [Francis Hart](#)

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

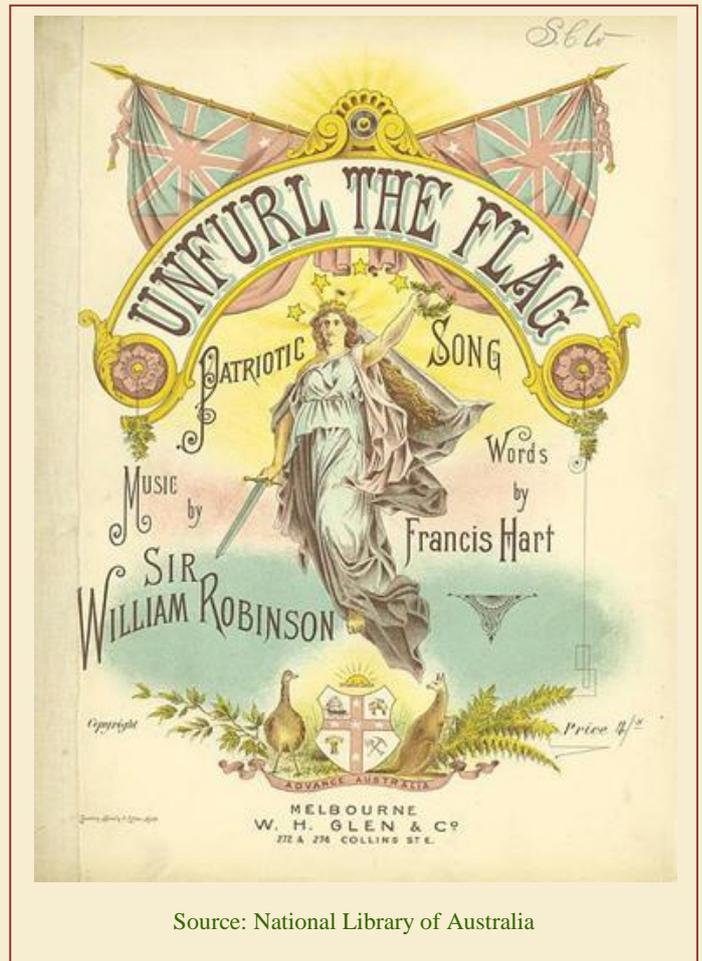
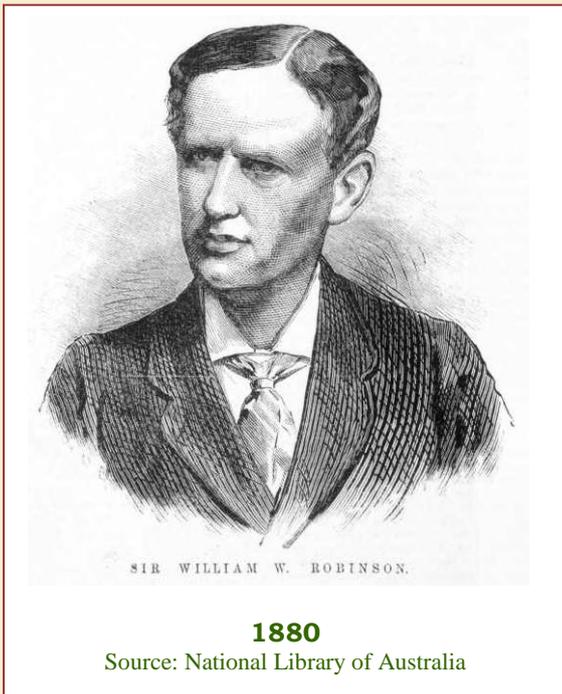
- 1894:** **The Handsome Ransom** (aka Predatoras; Or, The Brigand's Bride) [opерetta]
1896: **The Nut Brown Maid** [opera] (unperformed)

FURTHER REFERENCE

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"William Cleaver Francis Robinson." *Wikipedia* [sighted 26/04/2011]
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See also:

A: 28 Mar. (1891), 15.



Last updated: 16/12/2011

Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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