

# CHAPTER ONE

## "HARRY CLAY: A PORTRAIT"

Harry Clay, King of Vaudeville stood on the footpath in Castlereagh St., opposite the old Tivoli Theatre. Outside the theatre he saw his top comedian, Ted Tutty. Clay rammed a couple of fingers into his mouth and whistled. Tutty went down on all fours and as the traffic clattered to a halt crawled slowly across the road. He came up to his employer and licked his hand. Clay patted him on the head. "You're a good pooch, Teddy," he said. "Be on time tonight, or I'll down you." Then he went his way. Even the policeman on duty at the corner of King and Castlereagh Streets showed no surprise at these antics. Everyone in Sydney knew Harry Clay.

("Audiences" n. pag)

This chapter will attempt to examine perhaps the most difficult aspect involved in the historical reconstruction of Harry Clay - that of his personality. To a large degree, too, this includes his family and non-professional activities. From the start it must be acknowledged that almost everything of this nature that has been uncovered during the course of the dissertation's research is essentially that of biographical construction - a matter of interpretation which Barbara Garlick, in her work on the tent showman E. I. Cole, sees as an "obvious site of possible misrepresentation." In a sense it requires the historian to "negotiate the hagiography of publicity and the pitfalls of reconstruction from frequently disparate and ephemeral sources" (15-16). As Garlick further notes:

The problem of biography... is probably the most dangerous of minefields for the theatre historian.... All wrote their lives for public consumption, that is, for publicity and thus economic purposes (13, 16).

I too must acknowledge the ephemeral nature of this dissertation's bibliographic refiguration. The sources consulted include the major trade journals of the period, Australian metropolitan and regional newspapers, directories, legal documents, published and unpublished memoirs, and archival material such as Deceased Estate Files. This thesis also includes information from several interviews conducted either by myself or through the Oral History Collection of the Stanton Library, North Sydney. With the inclusion of numerous published anecdotes these provide a particularly useful conduit of information between the historical moment and the contemporary interpretation. Once again, however, they each become, in essence, manufactured texts, influenced as much by degrees of exaggeration as they are by selectivity and unreliable memory.

With this in mind, the perspective one gets from the many published insights into Clay is largely influenced by his "geniality" (perhaps the most often used expression) and his physical presence. Numerous anecdotes concerning Harry Clay's generosity abound within the pages of the trade journals of the period, as do expressions of gratitude from many employees, both past and present. These should be considered somewhat

circumspectly, however, as both the origins and the objectives of the producers of these platitudes are all too often unidentifiable. They do on the other hand indicate very strongly the perception and construction of Clay generated by the press, and accepted within the social fabric of not just those living in Sydney and NSW, but to the extent of these publications' distribution networks. For example, a 1911 issue of the Theatre published an account of Clay's generous hand-out to an old cripple, "who on the tender<sup>1</sup> putting out from the Queensland town of Mackay was seeking money to enable him to get to his wife and children." Noting the lack of charity by Fasola (Fasola's Vaudeville Company) "who had done exceptional business in Mackay, largely as a result of his manager having secured the hall which Mr Clay for years had been in the habit of playing in," the magazine records that "Mr Clay immediately hunted up the ancient derelict, and promptly gave him five times the amount he wanted. A white man<sup>2</sup> always is the generous, big-hearted Harry" (May 1912, 29).<sup>3</sup>

Harry Clay's good-nature and attitude is generally seen as very much a central aspect to his success as a theatrical entrepreneur. As the following chapters will indicate, he not only employed quality and popular artists for his operations, but also sought to give those with ability, although perhaps lacking in experience, a chance. And in this matter he is seen to have committed himself to the improvement of those willing to listen and learn from his knowledge and experience. On the other hand, he was with little doubt a tough manager - one who would brook no dissent or any unprofessional attitude, and whose gruff manner would seldom fail to put performers in their place. Despite this, he was by all reports extremely well-liked by his artists and throughout the vaudeville community. Charles Norman distinctly remembers his first meeting with Clay, sometime in 1923. Norman, having recently moved up from Melbourne with his partner Chic Arnold, recalls that:

He was quite a gentleman.... He came outside the office and he stood there with Chic and I, and he talked to us about the business and what we could do, and how he expected a lot because he said we've had some very good people from Melbourne. So he said you've got a very good chance here.... and he gave us good advice. He appealed to us when we first met him as a kind person (Appendix H, 162).

Roy Rene's recollection of Clay [*included in Chapter 3*] is also a favourable one. An Australian Variety and Show World glimpse published in 1916 also provides us with a sample impression of the kind of reputation Clay held during his business career:

Harry Clay was recently presented with a framed photograph of the picnic group. Conductor Percy Davis, on behalf of the committee, handed the gift over to the silvery-haired one, who responded in a cordial and appreciative speech. The good feeling existing between the genial Clay and his employees is most marked (12 Apr. 1916, 5).

---

<sup>1</sup> Arrival by sea at Mackay for many years required passengers and cargo to be transported from the steamer to the shore by small boats (or tenders as they were known).

<sup>2</sup> The term "white man" is used frequently during the period of time covered by this thesis as an expression for a man of honourable character, such as was conventionally associated with one of European extraction.

<sup>3</sup> The full anecdote is included as part of Appendix J. This thesis will also present further examples of Clay's "geniality" as recorded throughout his lifetime, within the following chapters and as part of the Appendix (see I, J and K).

The media construction of Harry Clay also often includes observations regarding his physical appearance and manner - his robust physique, ability with his fists, and his youthful looks (despite the advancing years) being mentioned either in passing, or as the focus of personal insights. For example, Australian Variety claimed in 1914 that, "he is (apart from his grey hair) as young looking as when [this] writer first heard him... about twenty-three years ago. A smart dresser, and of fine personality, Mr Clay is still a powerful factor as a vaudeville artist" (13 May 1914, n. pag.). Some six years later, and then fifty-five years of age, Clay's youthful looks were again referred to in the same magazine:

Although connected with the theatrical business for about thirty-five years - if not more - there are those who will tell you that apart from his silvery hair, "Harry Clay is as young looking as when we first knew him, over thirty years ago; yes, sir!" There is nothing like feeling just as young as you can, but when a man looks a decade more youthful than he is then good luck to him. Mr Clay doesn't appear ten years younger than he actually is - he looks twenty! (29 Apr. 1920, n. pag.).

Clay was also remembered as a manager who was required to use his fists over the years in order to bring undesirable behaviour in his audiences under control. The Argus records that he "was a pretty good chucker-out... often [giving] a demonstration of this from the stage of the Bridge Theatre" ("Sometimes" n. pag.). By all accounts, this was not an era when shy and retiring accountant type entrepreneurs took to vaudeville management - especially not in the working-class suburbs or mining towns. Even as late as 1918, when aged in his early fifties, the Theatre records him attending to a "hulking six-footer" who was "promptly dispatched into unconsciousness" (Nov. 1918, 24) [*see also Appendix J, 178*]; while two years later, when announcing that he was available for an "old Buffers' boxing contest," Australian Variety suggested that "whoever beats Harry will know there has been a cyclone around somewhere. He can hit like a mule kicking" (1 Apr. 1920, 3).

To a large degree Harry Clay's personality and management style were shaped by his experiences as a minstrel singer during the last fifteen years of the nineteenth century, a career that included a great deal of country touring. His physical abilities were also honed through years of labouring, first as an apprentice tradesman, and later in response to the requirements of a travelling showman, both as an entertainer and a manager. Like many artists, Clay both celebrated "the good old days" and reminded readers of how tough it had been then:

And to think of the hardships such men suffered! Others with not a fraction of their gifts are today getting more for a week than they earned in three months. Except for a few comedians the performers of the present time - in minstrel-work and vaudeville, I mean - are not to be compared with the men of twenty years ago. Comparatively speaking the lot of the artist to-day is truly a bed of roses (Theatre Sept. 1914, 25).

Although much of the biographical information presented in this thesis is seemingly open to self-aggrandisement or refiguration, there are several historical records which provide us with less subjective glimpses at Harry Clay's early life, if still presenting for the historian areas of ambiguity with respect to the details of his personality and experiences.

Harry Clay was born Henry Clay<sup>4</sup> on the 10th of May 1865 in the Patrick Plains, of New South Wales, an area which encompasses the town of Singleton. His father, John Clay, described as a dealer on his son's birth certificate, was 57 years of age; his mother just 32. Very little is known of John Clay at this stage, other than the details provided on birth, deaths and marriage registrations, but from these it can be established that he was born in London in 1808, and that he and Mary Anne Lord, of Windsor, N.S.W., married in Sydney on the 27th of October 1851. It was in Sydney, too, that they had the first of their four surviving children, a daughter named Mary who was born in 1853. The Clays continued to live in Sydney for at least the next decade, with their daughter being followed in 1855 by Ralph J. and then another son, George, three years later. By at least 1862, however, the family is known to have moved to the Patrick Plains district. In that year Mary gave birth to a second daughter, Sarah, in the nearby centre of Murrurundi, and then in 1865 their youngest surviving child, Henry, was born.



**Plate 1**

Harry Clay: From the front cover of Australian Variety 23 May 1917.  
(Courtesy of the Mitchell Library, NSW)

With little information now available with respect to the local community of Patrick Plains, the Clay family's short association with the district remains relatively unknown. It is presumed that John Clay's decision to move to the area would have taken into consideration the business opportunities on offer in the rapidly developing and expanding district. Another possibility is the fact that a Clay family member,

---

<sup>4</sup> Clay's birth certificate shows only the name Henry Clay, although several records within his Deceased Estate File include the name Walter as a middle name.

William Clay, had already established himself in the area some years previously, thus presenting John Clay with an additional incentive to settle his family there. These years in the district were marred by tragedy, however, with the death in 1867 of five year old Sarah at Muswellbrook, while two years later another girl, Elizabeth, died from complications at birth. During the next three years or so they continued to live in the area, but by around 1872 or 1873 most of the family had moved to Newcastle.<sup>5</sup>



**Plate 2**  
Patrick Plains, Hunter Valley region

As with their time at Patrick Plains, little is known about the Clays' residence in Newcastle other than rare glimpses furnished by Harry Clay in later years. A 1914 overview of his career published in the Theatre supplies information gleaned from him with regard to a delivery service he ran from the age of eight: "He had two delivery vans - not boxes drawn by billygoats," notes the magazine, "but proper carts and horses. Mr Clay himself worked one [and] he employed a man to drive the other" ("Performer" 25). While the plausibility of this anecdote naturally requires some caution, the acumen and workaholic attitude which informed Clay's business style throughout much of his career may well have been formed by this kind of experience during his early years in Newcastle. It is possible, too, that his father's influence with regard to hard work and enterprise could have provided Clay with added incentive to succeed in entrepreneurial activities.

By the age of 18 Clay was apprenticed into the plastering trade in Newcastle, a position he held down for some eighteen months. In the same article published in the Theatre, he recalls appearing in amateur stage-work around the same time, performing as a tenor singer and playing in farces ("Performer" 25). It is likely

<sup>5</sup> It is believed that the oldest daughter, Mary, having married a local man, Thomas Parsons, in 1871 stayed in the district.

then that these would have been minstrel shows. Even at age eighteen Clay's most valuable asset, his voice, was noticeable, it having been developed as a youngster through his singing in local Church of England groups. One of the amateur societies he was prominently identified with during this period was The Great Northern Variety Company. By around 1884, he had given up plastering and taken to the stage professionally. His debut was with a little touring show organised to play a circuit in the Northern Rivers area of N.S.W.<sup>6</sup> The tour was apparently a reasonably successful one as it reportedly "paid its way," a difficult enough assignment for inexperienced touring showmen ("Performer" 25). Some short time later the young Henry Clay, as he was more commonly known during this period, moved to Sydney where he set about establishing himself as a professional minstrel tenor. [*Chapter Two takes up Clay's career from this point*]

Much of Harry Clay's personal life is of course unknown, with most of the information available coming from the various trade journals published over the course of his career. Unfortunately many of the insights published within these sources have concentrated on aspects of his business operations. Although not known to have come from a theatrical background, or endowed with any particularly gifted abilities other than a good voice, a strong personality, and high expectations, he was able to make his name quite quickly in Sydney's popular world of variety entertainment. This would lead eventually to his associations with both the higher echelons of the show business world, and in terms of his entrepreneurial career, with a number of experienced business men, including A.R. Abbott and solicitor Harold T. Morgan (an alderman and several times Mayor of Newtown). Both men would become Clay's eventual business partners in the Bridge Theatre Company.

Only sketchy details are known, too, of Harry Clay's family life. Virtually nothing concerning his wife has been located in the various publications searched during the research phase of this thesis, with only a little more having been found in relation to his daughter, Essie. And the information about Kate and Essie contained in these is for the most part related to performance matters, much of this being published during several Queensland tours prior to, and during, Clay's early entrepreneurial activities. It has been established, however, that Clay married fellow minstrel singer and actress Catherine Jubb in 1887. The wedding took place in Glebe, with Harry just 22 and Kate, as she was called, 18. Almost all the other knowledge concerning Kate Clay has come from either Registrar General records or from Harry and Essie Clay's Deceased Estate Files.

Of the information concerning Kate Clay that has been located we know that she was born in Glebe on the twenty-eighth of June 1869, the eldest child of Thomas and Mary Ann Jubb. As a contralto and serio-comic, her career seems to have been very much tied in with her husband's, there being no record found as yet to

---

<sup>6</sup> The name or details of the company have not yet been established. However, two other artists associated with the tour were Harry Kelly and Jack Huntsdale.

her performing with any other managements other than those in which Harry was engaged. In addition, she took the stage name Kate Henry, using Harry's Christian name as her stage surname. 1905, the year she is known to have last toured Queensland as a performer with her husband's company, is also the last time any reference or record concerning her has been located, apart from several legal documents.

In 1888, the year following their marriage, Kate gave birth to their only child, Essie, in Glebe. Harry Clay was undoubtedly devoted to his daughter, and gave her every opportunity he could in the entertainment business. A child performer almost from infancy, she toured many times with both Harry and Catherine leading up the establishment of Clay's vaudeville company, and is also known to have been given a short engagement with Harry Rickards in 1898 at age ten (Sydney Morning Herald 2 Apr. 1898, 2). In later years she became a well-known attraction in her father's tours, and eventually took on two leading roles in his 1908 and 1909 Dramatic Company tours of Queensland, further testament to Harry Clay's desire to provide opportunities for her. And indeed, it seems that both her career and reputation as a serious actress were on the rise - perhaps in part the result of having undergone tuition from Harry Leston and Roland Watts-Phillips (two leading Australian based actor/teachers of the period) around 1908/09. She is also known to have appeared in several notable dramatic productions in the following years, along with vaudeville engagements with her father's company.

It is believed that Essie Clay's career was unfortunately brought to an end after she contracted a serious bout of Spanish Influenza in 1919. Reports indicate that it took several years for her to physically recover from this, although there is also reason to suspect that it may have had an even longer lasting psychological effect. Never marrying, she is known to have resided for many years at Bondi, later returning to Glebe Point, where she died in 1948. Her Deceased Estate File, which also contains her Last Will and Testament, suggests rather strongly that she died having incurred a good deal of bitterness and/or sadness in her life. [*For further details on Kate and Essie Clay see Appendix L and M respectively*].

With regard to Harry Clay's relationship with his wife, there is some question as to whether they remained together as husband and wife, (although it is known that they never divorced) due in part to both the information found regarding the couple's ownership of property in Glebe and Watson's Bay, and the complete lack of reference to his wife by Clay throughout his career. Concerning this last matter, there has been no mention of Catherine Clay found whatsoever in any periodicals, or as having had anything to do with Clay's company after 1905, even to being involved with the company's annual picnics.<sup>7</sup> Although there

---

<sup>7</sup> These picnics were designed to bring the various members of the company and their spouses or friends together in a social gathering. While many of those attending the picnics are mentioned in industry magazines, no indication of Kate Clay's or for that matter Essie Clay's, presence has been located. The social aspects of Clay's organisation were apparently highly valued. Valmai Goodlet recalls in an interview conducted as part of this research project, that her father, Maurice Chenoweth (a Clay's manager/producer), had many gatherings at the family's home in Stanmore, whereupon the company's artists would regularly socialise (and effectively entertain the local neighborhood as well). Goodlet vividly remembers Amy Rochelle (later the Fuller's leading principle boy) attending many of these "parties" - saying of the Australian soprano, that "she was simply wonderful."

is the likelihood that at some stage they separated, it is also known that Clay died at his wife's residence at Watson's Bay, and that Catherine Clay is buried with her husband at Sydney's South Head Cemetery. This suggests that any such separation, if it occurred, was not particularly acrimonious or indeed final. Furthermore, the headstone on Clay's grave records, too: "In Memory of my loving Husband." It is further known that Catherine Clay retained Harold T. Morgan as her legal representative, he having been her husband's business partner and solicitor. Morgan continued to manage her financial affairs (in addition to having loaned her a significant amount of money) up until at least 1948, which presents still more evidence in support of an argument that some kind of relationship existed between husband and wife prior to Harry Clay's death.

In the matter of property ownership, too, the house at 218 Glebe Point Road provides us with further insight into the relationship between Harry Clay's personal life and his business strategies. Believed to have been the first of several valuable pieces of real estate bought by Clay, this property was situated in what was (and still is) considered the fashionable area of Glebe. It was, however, purchased solely in the name of Catherine Clay. The reasons for this are unknown, although it has been speculated that perhaps the uncertain nature of Harry Clay's business, along with the fluctuating fortunes he may have encountered as a seasoned gambler, may well have seen him place the property (and others) in his wife's name to protect themselves against any unfortunate circumstances. There may well have been some legal and/or taxation reasons for this, too. In this matter it may be assumed that Clay was being guided from the earliest days by his friend and solicitor, Harold Morgan, as the latter's name is included in the legal papers assigned to the property sale.<sup>8</sup>

Purchased on the 2nd of September 1908, only days after the return of Clay's eighth Waxworks and Company tour of Queensland, the house and land cost an enormous £1,500. Of further surprise, however, is the fact that it was paid for with cash - there being no mortgage attached to the sale. This in itself suggests that Clay's business was by this stage returning him quite considerable amounts of money. The only evidence relating to Harry Clay's financial situation previous to that date is the large deposit he made in setting up a Trust Account for Essie in 1905. Records of this transaction can be found in his Deceased Estate File (NSW Government Archives, Location No 20/1021, File No 11278), and show that he opened the account at the Post Office Savings Bank in Martin Place with 300 pounds cash on the 22nd of August - only days after the completion of his fifth Queensland tour.

---

<sup>8</sup> The previous owners of 218 Glebe Point Road were the sons of the late George Wigram Allen, the original land owner of most of the Toxteth Park Estate, later Glebe. The house itself was built by a Presbyterian lay preacher named Walker, who ran the largest building company in the area. It has been suggested that the house was being run as a boarding house after 1914, to create additional income for the Clay's. The fact that the house was known to have been used for such purposes at some stage has been confirmed by the current owner, Christine Newton, although specific years have not yet been established. I wish to further express my gratitude to both Ms Newton for her generosity in allowing me access to the original deeds, and Glebe historian Max Solling for his invaluable assistance.



**Plate 3**  
218 Glebe Point Road  
(Clay Djubal)

Of interest, then, is the stark contrast this residence shows in relation to 25 Wigram Road - the single story terrace dwelling the Clays lived in only the year before. Less than fifty metres around the corner, the new premises (an impressive two-story residence with stables, staff quarters, detached kitchen, and magnificent cedar staircase and paneling) clearly indicates the distance Harry Clay had moved socially and financially. As Glebe historian Max Solling points out in an interview conducted as part of this dissertation's research, Wigram Road could still be classified as an upper class area, in comparison to the north eastern portion of Glebe, but is in no way comparable to the Glebe Point Road district north of Hereford Street and extending to the water, which includes No 218. This suggests that the period in which the Clay's resided at No 25 Wigram Road (1907 to 1908) is reflective of their economic stability in response to Harry Clay's increasingly successful business up to that time. Glebe Point Road, however, was considerably more fashionable and exclusive, indicating a significant shift in the family's financial position within a relatively short span of time.<sup>9</sup>

Fueling further speculation with regard to Clay's personal life around this time, Sand's Sydney Directory records that after having lived at 218 Glebe Point Road between 1909 and 1914, Harry Clay, either on his own or with Catherine, moved back to the same block of terrace houses in Wigram Road that he had previously lived in. This despite the fact that the Glebe Point Road property is known to have stayed in Catherine Clay's name until 1943. Between around 1914/15 and 1917 then, his residential address was at No. 29 Wigram Road, changing to No. 23 in 1918. In 1920 there is a reference in Sand's which records that Clay was living in Marine Parade, Vaucluse, further supported by a reference in Australian Variety which

---

<sup>9</sup> For further information regarding Harry Clay's ownership of other properties, and the unusual circumstances concerning several of these, see Appendix K.

notes that "Clay's Watson's Bay tenants presented him with an address [speech] the other day, which was much appreciated" (18 June 1920, 7). It would appear likely, however, that that as Clay is known to have passed away at "Vaucluse Flats," Watson's Bay, and that there is no evidence of his ownership of the property in the Deceased Estate File (to the contrary, several references in the file point to the residence being "his wife's place"), that once again Catherine Clay has held the title to the property.



**Plate 4**

Terrace houses in Wigram Road, Glebe (including Nos 23, 25 and 29,  
where Harry Clay is known to have resided)  
(Clay Djubal)

While the situation regarding his marriage, residential addresses and ownership of properties is somewhat unclear, another aspect of Harry Clay's personal life is far more obvious - that of his involvement in horse racing (and in particular, gambling). Clay was renowned for his love of betting - with many references and anecdotes concerning his favourite non-vaudeville pastime being found in the periodicals of the day. [*several of these are included in Appendix J*] In 1921 Everyone's reported that Clay, "whose great hobby is racehorses, has recently changed his team from Kogarah to Kensington," and that he had "bought a couple of fine yearlings at Tuesday's sale ... [putting] them under the watchful eye of Trainer Arthur, the old-time ventriloquist, who now turns out a good many winners" (30 Mar. 1921, 20). This would seem to indicate that Clay had been involved in the horse-racing industry for some period of time. Furthermore, his long-time friendship with Dick Heaney, a Randwick racecourse identity [*see Appendix E*], suggests that Clay's knowledge of the sport could have been extensive, if not well informed.

While anecdotes concerning his wins and losses at the track have often been recorded throughout his later lifetime, reports of Clay's association with others in the theatrical community are rather more scarce. With his hands-on commitment to the company no doubt taking up much of his time, and with horse-racing taking up most of whatever leisure-time he had to spare, Clay's active involvement within the Sydney community

(whether social or institutional) was, not surprisingly, somewhat minimal. As Chapter Two of this thesis will shortly indicate, however, Harry Clay's infrequent appearance at public social activities (including such events as the popular benefit nights) is also evident throughout his earlier career. An example of his low-key attitude to social interests concerns his brief involvement with a vaudeville social club known as "The Chasers," a group who met regularly once a week to cruise out on Sydney Harbour as a kind of "boys only club" with fishing, drinking, and throwing (wrestling) high on the agenda.

Consisting mostly of an "in-group" of artists closely associated with Australian Variety (who published their weekly exploits over a number of years in a column titled "With the Chasers"), the main ring-leaders were Jack "Porky" Kearns, Martin Brennan (Australian Variety editor and publisher), and others such as Charlie Vaude, Bill Kelso and chief cook and organiser Joe Wangenheim. The Chasers often invited local and overseas celebrities into their fold, including Harry Rickards and the Fullers, with many like Billie C. Brown and Billy Watson becoming regulars themselves. Harry Clay is known to have joined the group only on four occasions - these being during the winter months of 1914. His first occasion was such a meritorious achievement for The Chasers that Charlie Vaude immortalised the event with a poem, included in this thesis as the Preface, and titled "When the Baritone was Waiting on the Hungry Harry Clay." That Clay did not continue his association with this vaudevillian-dominated club, in addition to his acknowledged workaholic status, suggests that social activities outside his work and racing interests were not a priority.

Off stage, Clay's complex nature was abundantly clear to those who knew and worked with him. As the introduction pointed out, he was extremely particular about the quality of his entertainments, refusing to allow coarse jokes or language to occur on the stage or, if at all possible, from within the audience. However, as the "Audiences are Tough" article records, "fans came miles sometimes just to hear Harry Clay swear" (n. pag.). An amusing incident recalled in the "Sometimes His Shows Were a Riot" article shows this side of Clay's nature when he attended a rehearsal to which only two company members had turned up. The flow of invective, which apparently lasted some two or more minutes, was overheard by the female artist present behind the stage. After apologising to her, Clay is recorded as saying "but if you had to work with a mob of Australian @#%!", then followed another stream of adjectives – "you'd swear too" (n. pag).<sup>10</sup>

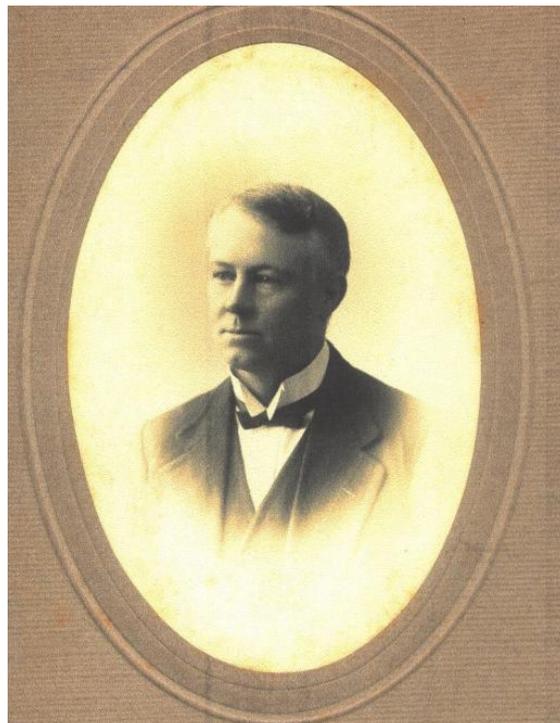
Harry Clay's lectures on the perils of drink and tobacco were also an apparently legendary aspect of his personality. "When tapped for a loan," notes the Theatre, "it was ... Clay's custom, before responding, to lecture the applicant as to the evils of smoking and drinking. 'Why, [Clay would ask] don't you give it up? It's no use telling me you can't. Look at me! I neither smoke nor drink. When I say a thing I do it. I've got no time for the man who hasn't got the backbone to stick to what he says'" (June 1915, 7). On the other hand, the subject of addiction to gambling was a matter he was known to be somewhat chary about - the same magazine's writer indicating that it was, in his case, "a very tender spot."

---

<sup>10</sup> The entire anecdote is included in Appendix J, 277).

The geniality and popularity accorded Harry Clay, along with the various personality traits and anecdotes published both during and after his lifetime is as previously mentioned open to being read as having been partly manufactured for publicity purposes. The significant turnout at his funeral in February 1925, however, is in some way a testament to the regard in which he was held by those who knew him (Everyone's 25 Feb. 1925, 4). That his contribution to Australian popular theatre has been so surprisingly overlooked and underestimated by historians during the past seventy or more years perhaps reflects in part the cultural values of Australian society as much as it does our ability to record and reflect on local achievements. To this end the following chapters will investigate Clay's influence on the Australian entertainment industry and the Australian people during his forty year career - an achievement dominated by his stand for the local artist and the local industry. And it was achievement which the Theatre recognised when it recorded:

Mr Clay is really the patron saint of the Australian performer. And how many hungry homes would there be, if it were not for the commercial-showman genius of Harry. For the simple, truthful fact is - the generous Sir Benjamin Fuller himself would be the first to admit it - that nobody in Australia has surpassed Mr Clay in the employment of Australian-born artists (July 1923, 17).



**Plate 5**  
Harry Clay  
(The Author)