

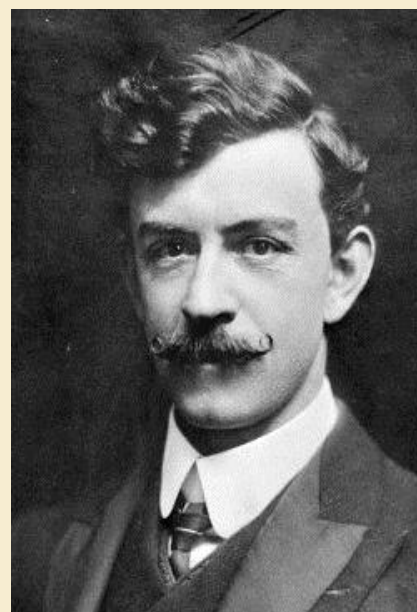
## ALFRED HILL

The composer of more than 500 works, including 12 symphonies and more than 14 music theatre works, Alfred Hill published his first composition at age 16, and later studied music at the Royal Conservatorium, Leipzig. He later returned to New Zealand where he set up a teaching academy and became the conductor for the Wellington Orchestral Society. His interest in New Zealand's indigenous music and customs saw him begin collaborate with Arthur H. Adams on several Maori-influenced works in the early 1890s. The pair later worked together on *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1898) and *Tapu* (written 1899 and first produced in 1903). In 1900 his comic opera *Lady Dolly* staged in Australia by J. C. Williamsons, while *A Moorish Maid* was produced in New Zealand (1905). He soon afterwards became Principal of the Austral Orchestral College, a co-founder of the Sydney Repertory Society, and in 1913 co-founder of the Australian Opera League (with Fritz Hart). The AOL staged his opera *Giovanni* in 1914. Hill became Professor of Theory and Composition at the NSW Conservatorium of Music in 1916, and Chief Conductor for the NSW State Symphony Orchestra in 1922. His music theatre works include *The Rajah of Shivapore* (1917), *Auster* (1922) and *The Ship of Heaven* (1933). He also composed music for several Australian films, notably *Broken Melody* (1938) and *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940).

A gifted violinist and composer of over 500 compositions comprising comic operas, film scores and a variety of classical genres from string quartets to full orchestra works, Alfred Francis Hill was both the first fully professional New Zealand-based composer and the man most responsible for introducing the country's indigenous music to western styles of composition. His pioneering efforts not only led to the promotion of Maori music in New Zealand and Australia but also assisted his own career advancement. Indeed, he is now seen as the most significant composer of the Antipodean region during the early 1900s, with his influence being seen in the development of key mid-twentieth century Australian composers like John Antill and Roy Agnew.

### 1870-1890

Hill was born in Richmond, Melbourne, on 16th December 1870. His father, an amateur violinist and Bristol-based hat-maker had initially sailed for Australia to attempt his luck on the gold fields but found more success with his instrument than he did finding gold. The family moved to Auckland when Alfred was about 18 months old and later settled in Wellington where the father set up his own hat-making business on Lambton Quay. It was while living in Wellington that Hill's father formed several small amateur orchestras, with each ensemble invariably made up of family members. At one stage the family even toured a Christy Minstrel-style show called Hill's Brigands. Alfred Hill's siblings included brothers, Edward (described as a fine tenor), Charles (an accomplished flautist), John (also regarded as a gifted musician), and a sister Mabel, who excelled as an artist. It was Mabel who designed the cover of Alfred's first published work, *"The Organist,"* which he composed in 1886 at age just sixteen (Thomson, "Alfred Hill" 217-18). During his childhood Hill learned the cornet and violin, playing the former instrument with Martin Simonsen's opera company at the age of nine, and the latter on tour with Charles Harding's Grand Opera Company at age fourteen. Realising that his sons Alfred and John were exceptional musical talents, and that they had moved beyond the point where local music teachers could help them, Alfred's father arranged to send the brothers to Europe. The opportunity was in part realised through the generosity of the Wellington public who raised the additional money required through a benefit concert.



1906

Source: [www.folksong.org.nz](http://www.folksong.org.nz)

In 1886 Alfred and John travelled to Leipzig where they studied at the Royal Conservatorium of Music between 1887 and 1891. There they were able to involve themselves in the cultural and artistic climate of one of Germany's major centres during one of its more significant periods of transition. Alfred studied violin under Hans Sitt (1850-1922). He later claimed that Sitt had a significant influence on his career as both a violinist and composer. During his time at the conservatorium Alfred won numerous awards, including the Helbig Prize, and eventually graduated with an honours diploma in teaching and performance. The letter accompanying his Performer's Diploma (Reiferzeugniss) noted that Hill's "exemplary energy, diligence and perseverance, assisted by good inborn talent enabled him to make a professionally very valuable progress in his musical education... the delicacy of invention, great fertility of resource, and tasteful instrumentation, for which his works are distinguished, bear no light testimony to his ability as a composer" (qtd in McCreadie "Some Backgrounds" 188). During his time at Leipzig, Hill also wrote his first cantata, 'New Jerusalem' (SMH: 24 Dec. 1910, 4). After graduating from the Leipzig Conservatorium he was invited to play second violin with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, which he did for a short period under the conductorship of such composers as Brahms, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky.

## 1891 - 1901

In 1891 Hill returned to New Zealand, setting himself up as a violin teacher, recitalist, chamber musician, and conductor of choirs and orchestras, notably the Wellington Orchestral Society (1892-96). The mid-to-late 1890s also saw him collaborate with writer/journalist Arthur H. Adams, and with whom he shared an interest in Maori culture. The two men began to study seriously the music, customs, history and stories of New Zealand's indigenous people, and subsequently went on to create several Maori-inspired works during the 1890s - including two string quartets, the cantata *Hinemoa* (1895), and a comic opera, *The Whipping Boy* (1893). Interestingly, despite his fascination for drawing upon the musical materials of Maori culture, Hill's compositions are heavily dependent on conventional western music forms - particularly his romantic comic operas. This can be seen, for example, in the music theatre works *Hinemoa*, *Tawhaki*, *Tapu* and *Teora*, which lay "largely within the conventional harmonic and formal patterns of Leipzig traditionalism." In this respect, as Andrew McCreddie further notes: "the influence of [the Leipzig tradition] is perceptible in [Hill's] own classification of his works as 'romantic comic operas'" ("Some Backgrounds" 206). While the music of the Maori people was an obvious passion in Hill's life, his interest in Maori and culture and the people is said to have been genuine and deep. As John Thompson notes, the feeling was mutual, the Maori people "trusted him as he moved amongst them, noting down songs and hakas" (8). Hill's encouragement of their music and arts, something he did throughout his life, was particularly significant in works such as *Hinemoa*. Another cantata, *Tawhaki*, completed in 1909, is also based on Maori themes (SMH: 24 Dec. 1910, 4). No production of this work has yet been located, however.

This early period in New Zealand was not without its trials, however. Hill suffered a good deal of criticism from both within and outside the Wellington Orchestral Society due to his firm artistic stance. At one stage this led to his controversial decision to refuse to conduct for a visiting virtuoso, the Chevalier de Kontski (Thompson "Question of Authenticity" n. pag.). After resigning his position with the Wellington orchestra he joined Ovide Musin's ensemble, then visiting New Zealand, and toured with them to Sydney. When the troupe disbanded in March 1897, Hill

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*Sydney Morning Herald* 3 Mar. (1900), 2.

remained in Sydney for several years teaching and conducting ensembles such as the Sydney Liedertafel (for whom he was appointed conductor in early 1898) and the Great Synagogue Choir. During this period he also frequently performed at various high profile concerts, notably as a member of specially organised string quartets. On 22 October 1898, for example, Hill presented the ballad from *Hinemoa* during the last of a series of Pleyel Concerts at the Y.M.C.A. Hall. Miss Ruby Bowring was the featured vocalist. (SMH: 15 Oct. 1898, 2). He also contributed some music to the 1898 Williamson and Musgrove pantomime *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Syd), along with Leon Caron and George Pack. Adams contributed the libretto. Hill's comic opera *Lady Dolly* premiered two years later with the assistance of members of the Sydney Liedertafel. While his application for the professorship in music at Auckland University that same year was unsuccessful, in Australia his reputation was becoming increasingly more high profile. One highlight of Hill's early years in Australia occurred when he conducted the Commonwealth Celebrations choir of eleven thousand voices and ten brass bands on New Year's Day 1901.

## 1902-1911

Although residing in Sydney, Hill nevertheless criss-crossed the Tasman on a regular basis between 1902 and 1911, either writing or conducting musical comedies and operatic works through his employment with J. C. Williamson. In 1903 he wrote the music for the highly successful pantomime *Sleeping Beauty* (Theatre Royal, Syd) and had the first performance of his romantic comic opera, *Tapu* staged. His final collaboration with Arthur Adams, the work had been initially written sometime around 1897-98 and accepted for production by Williamson. Adams is said to have been offered a position as Williamson's literary secretary partly on the strength of his libretto. When Williamson decided to delay *Tapu's* premiere due to other commitments, notably his touring production of *The Geisha*, Hill eventually tired of the wait and subsequently gave Pollard's Opera Company permission to stage the work in New Zealand during its 1903 tour (it is also believed to have been staged by the company in Tasmania). When Williamson did eventually decide to produce the opera in Australia in 1904 Adams had by then left his employ. Unbeknown to the librettist, Williamson hired David H. Souter rework the text, while Bert Royle was engaged to write additional lyrics to accompany some new music scored by Hill. Angered by what he saw as an infringement on his rights as the originator of the work, and more so because he deemed the revised work vastly inferior, Adams voiced his low opinion of Williamson (and Australian theatre managers in general) on a number of occasions in his career as a critic and editor. He was also supported by Hill over the *Tapu* issue, with the composer later claiming that the Pollards' production was

the superior one. *Tapu* was mooted for an English and European tour for *Tapu* by Williamson (in arrangement with Robert Courteneidge) but this never eventuated.

Sometime around late 1904/early 1905 Hill moved back to New Zealand to collaborate with music and drama critic, J. Youlin Birch on the romantic opera *A Moorish Maid; Or, Queen of the Riffs*. It was given its theatrical premiere in New Zealand in September 1905. Although the Auckland and Wellington seasons were critically and financially successful, producer George Stephenson found it necessary, as J. C. Williamson did with *Tapu*, to "improve" on the original for its Australian tour, and either rewrote the libretto himself or employed someone else (as yet unidentified) to do it. In an interview with the *Theatre* magazine in 1914, Hill concurred with Adams that these early experiences writing for the musical theatre stage were less than fruitful for the creators, both creatively and financially:<sup>1</sup>

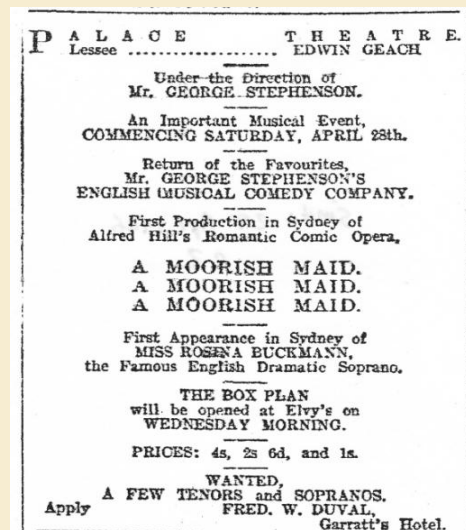
There is no money in writing music, absolutely none. What have I made out of my compositions? I received £100 from the late J.C. Williamson for the producing rights and half the music rights of *Tapu*. As you know, the opera didn't succeed. Mr Williamson had always faith in the music, but he couldn't get a satisfactory libretto. *The Moorish Maid* also suffered from a bad book and even as it was we took £1000 in a week with it in Auckland, and it did the same thing in Wellington.... Apart from the little I got out of this, and the straight-out fee I received for *Tapu* composition has brought me nothing" (Mar. 1914, n. pag.).

Hill's passion for Maori music resulted in several new Maori songs between 1904 and 1906. Among these was "Waiata Poi" (with lyrics based on a Maori myth). Arguably his most popular in that genre, John M. Thomson claims that the song kept John McIndoe's Dunedin press busy meeting the demand for New Zealand's first international sheet music best-seller ("Alfred Hill" 213). Another of his songs was performed to critical acclaim in Sydney during June 1905 by Watkin Mills of the Watkin Mills Company. The *Brisbane Courier* reported that the song, "Tangi," written especially for Mills, and published by Boosey and Co (London), is a "dramatic lament for

the dead, beginning by deep exhortations to mourn... and rising to a tempestuous climax on Wagnerian lines." Sung with "whole-hearted fervour," the song "went with admirable abandon" (17 June 1905, 12). Back in New Zealand in 1906 Hill began conducting New Zealand's first professional orchestra in a highly successful series of concerts at the Christchurch International Exhibition (1906-07). He is believed to have also begun composing the music to a libretto by W. H. Beattie on the subject of Don Quixote around the same time. Although no details of a staging of this work have yet been located, the *Theatre* magazine records in July 1909 that Beattie's 'book' for *Don Quixote in La Mancha*, despite being a "very awkward subject for the stage" demonstrates that as a librettist he "has a great talent" (11).

## 1912-1920

By 1912 Hill had slowed down his trans-Tasman movements, deciding to reside more or less permanently in Sydney from that time onwards. In some respect his unsuccessful attempt to establish an institute for the study of Maori music in Rotorua in 1910 may have been a factor in his decision to live in Australia. In Sydney he became principal of the Austral Orchestral College, and viola player for the Austral String Quartet. He also conducted concerts at the Town Hall for the Sydney Amateur Orchestral Society around this time, performing with other distinguished professionals including Fritz Hart, Cyril Monk and New Zealand soprano, Rita Lyons. Leading local amateurs such as tenor Arthur Appleby and Austral College graduate composer Roy E. Agnew were also elevated into the public domain through Hill's efforts. In 1913 he founded the Australian Opera League with Hart as part of an attempt to create an Australian operatic tradition. While Hill was concentrating his energies on establishing the AOL and his latest opera, *Giovanni*, his London representative, Cunningham Bridgeman, was working hard to raise the composer's profile in English circles. Bridgeman had been instrumental in having Hill's Maori Symphony produced at the Sydenham Crystal Palace in 1912, and on 23 January 1913 he staged *A Moorish Maid*, under the subtitle, *Queen of the Riffs*, at London's Savoy Hotel. With a strong cast, including diva Rosina Buckman, the comic opera was enthusiastically received by both the audience and the London critics. Speaking to 150 invited guests after the curtain, New Zealand's High Commissioner, Sir Joseph Ward "warmly extolled Mr Hill's talents, and expressed the hope that [the composer] might yet, whilst he remained alive, be recognised amongst British composers." Whether the opera was staged in London following this production is not yet known. It is also unclear whether a proposed City Operatic Society, production (a joint venture between the Austral Operatic Society and the City of Sydney Musical Comedy Company) went ahead either. Despite several advertisements calling for amateur actors and singers being published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* during February and March of 1913, no details of a revival have been located in the paper over the following months.



*Sydney Morning Herald* 28 Apr. (1906), 2.

<sup>1</sup> See Arthur H. Adams entry in this appendix for further details (713).



*Green Room* Nov. (1922), 16.

In February 1913 Hill completed another Maori-influenced opera, *Teora, the Weird Flute*, and indicated that it would possibly be his contribution to the first evening of opera staged by the newly formed Australian Opera League. It is not believed to have been staged until 1928 (details of this performance are yet to be located). The opera is known to have been broadcast by the ABC on 2 December 1929, however. The programme was produced under the direction of J. M. Post. Midway through 1913 the Sydney Repertory Society (which Hill had co-founded with advisory board members including Arthur Adams and David Souter) began presenting regular entertainments at its new theatre in Grosvenor Street (it was previously known as Federation Hall). These concerts, which involved both music and drama, utilised some of the best amateur talent available in Sydney. Typical of these evenings was the first Caleb Porter and Alfred Hill Saturday Night Soiree Musicale, presented on 31 May 1913, and billed to include: "song, stories, wit, humour and dramatic excerpts" (SMH: 31 May 1913, 2). The idea behind this enterprise, according to Hill, was "to get together and train a little body of earnest, sincere amateurs, who will act on this stage of ours the works of some of those men who seem to have pierced a little more deeply into the heart of things than others" (SMH: 2 June 1913, 3). The second concert, staged on 7 June 1913, saw Rita Lyons

present the soprano ballad from Hill's cantata *Hinemoa*. On 18 July the company even staged a revival of *The Moorish Maid* over a short season. The cast included seasoned performers such as Marcia Boulais and Vivien Ross-Browne. 1913 also saw Hill appointed to the Advisory Committee establishing the N.S.W. Conservatorium of Music (it was eventually founded in 1916).

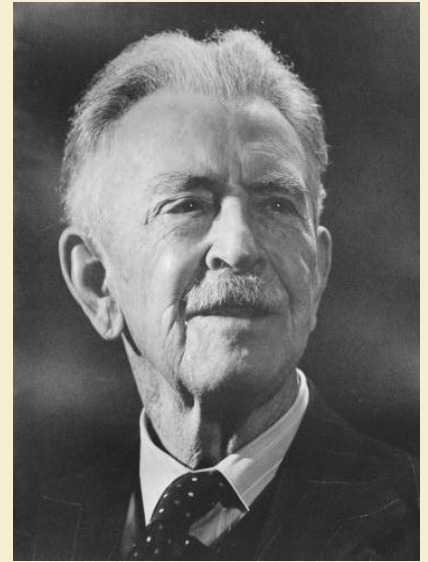
In 1914 the Australian Opera league presented Hill's *Giovanni* and Fritz Hart's *Pierrette* in Sydney and Melbourne to mixed critical attention. The company folded soon afterwards, however, due in part to the advent of the First World War. Not content to remain within the confines of music, Hill had his one act play *Wattle Tree Farm* staged on 28 July 1914 at the Repertory's theatre. During the year he also co-founded the Musical Association of New South Wales (later becoming its president), and continued to actively push for both a New Zealand Conservatorium of Music and for the foundation of an institute of Maori studies at Rotarua.

In January 1916 Hill was invited to take up the position of the first Professor of Theory and Composition at the NSW State Conservatorium (he had been involved with the advisory committee for the establishment the Conservatorium for some two years). The following year his comic opera, *The Rajah of Shivapore* premiered in Sydney, include. Among its prestigious cast were Alice Bennetto, George Whitehead, Frederick Ward, while the orchestra performed under the baton of the composer. It toured to several major Australian centres and incited a number of burlesque versions over the next few years. The *Brisbane Courier's* "Music and Drama" column also records that Hill had already begun working on another opera, this time based on dramatic poem by Mrs E. Congeau (1 Dec. 1917, 12). Five years later that opera, *Auster*, premiered in Sydney for the first time on an Australian stage.

## 1921-1960

In early 1922 Hill was also appointed deputy conductor for the N.S.W. State Orchestra's tour of New Zealand, and in September was elected to the position of chief conductor of the State Symphony Orchestra. During a visit to London in 1926 he recorded several of his compositions with the Mayfair Orchestra for HMV, including "Waiata Poi," "Tangi," the lake music from *Hinemoa* and "Waiata Maori." When ABC Radio station 2FC gave its premiere broadcast on 17 July 1929, Hill performed for the occasion as part of a State Conservatorium string quartet - the other musicians being Gerald Waklen, Gladstone Bell and Lloyd Davis. In 1935 he established his own Academy of Music, an institution which was to concentrate on the study of harmony, counterpoint, chamber music and opera. This enterprise failed to live up to its expectations, however, and eventually closed in January, 1937. From that point onwards Hill devoted himself fulltime to composition. Several pieces of music he composed during his later years were incorporated into locally produced motion pictures, with one of these being Ken G. Hall's *The Broken Melody* (1938). Loosely based on F. J. Thwaites novel about a talented violin player who falls on hard times before eventually finding fame and fortune through the love of a woman, the film's operetta scenes and main violin theme were scored by Hill (with all other incidental music by Horace Keats). During the 1940s he also contributed additional incidental music to Charles Chauvel's Australian classic *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940) and another Hall film *Smithy* (1946). Two New Zealand film productions also had their scores composed by Hill, the first, which was filmed at Lake Tapu in 1930, was commissioned by American producer, Alexander Marky, who apparently took off with the film stock and Hill's score. The other score was for *Rewi's Last Stand*, produced in 1938 for New Zealand film pioneer, Rudolph Hayward.

Alfred Hill died on 30 October 1960, aged almost ninety. During his lifetime he had written more than five hundred compositions, including twelve symphonies, numerous concerti, a mass, seventeen string quartets and eight operas. On his death his manuscripts were donated by his widow, Mirrie Hill, to the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Federal Music Library. His papers were given to the Mitchell Library and his books and instruments to the NSW State Conservatorium. The composition award which now bears his name was also founded by Mirrie Hill in memory of her husband. Further recognition of his services to Australian music were accorded him, too, when he was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (1953) and appointed Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 1960.



Source: National Library of Australia

Alfred Hill's strengths as a composer have generally been regarded as lying in his ability to construct pure melodic lines, and though the charm and fluency of his overall composition style. Sir Bernard Heinze once said that "composition in Australia owes much more to Hill than any other person who has ever written music here (qtd. in Atkinson et al, 110), a factor which can be seen in the fact that his career spanned the period in which traditional European music and early twentieth century Australian music first began to separate. It has also been

argued that Hill may well have been able to carve out a career in Britain and Europe had it not been for illness and the advent of World War I at a time when his reputation and music was being promoted in good light. As Jeremy Commons, an authority on opera of the period has notes, Hill's melodic qualities and sense of form would have ensured that the composer held his own alongside his European contemporaries (see Thomson "Alfred Hill" 220).

### MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

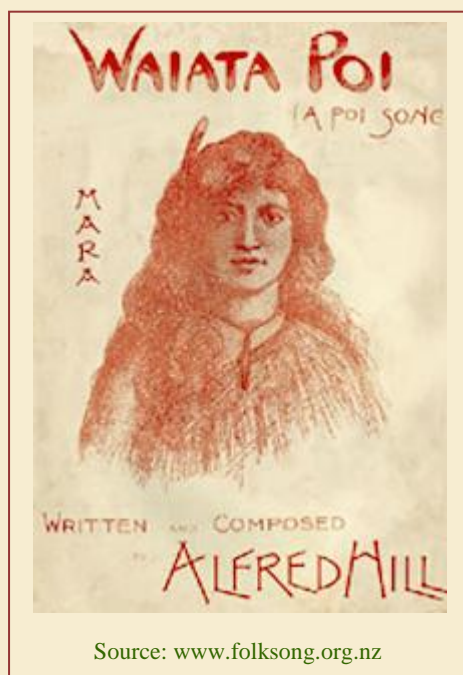
- n/e: **New Jerusalem** [cantata]
- 1893: **The Whipping Boy** [comic opera]
- 1895: **Hinemoa** [cantata]
- 1898: **Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves** [pantomime]
- 1900: **Lady Dolly** [comic opera]
- 1903: **The Sleeping Beauty and the Beast** [pantomime] • **Tapu** [romantic opera]
- 1905: **A Moorish Maid** [comic opera]
- 1909: **Don Quixote De La Mancha** [opera] • **Tawahaki** [cantata]
- 1913: **Teora, The Weird Flute** [opera]
- 1914: **Giovanni** [opera]
- 1917: **The Rajah of Shivapore** [comic opera]
- 1922: **Auster** [opera]
- 1933: **The Ship of Heaven** [music theatre]

### HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Alfred Hill's strengths as a composer lay in his ability to construct pure melodic lines and the overall charm and fluency of his composition style. Sir Bernard Heinze once said that 'composition in Australia owes much more to Hill than any other person who has ever written music here' (qtd. in *Dictionary of Arts in Australia*, 110), a factor that can be seen in the length of his career, spanning the period in which traditional European music and early twentieth-century Australian music first began to separate.
2. After his death, Hill's manuscripts were donated by his widow, Mirrie Hill, to the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Federal Music Library. His papers were given to the Mitchell Library (State Library of NSW) and his books and instruments to the NSW State Conservatorium. The composition award that now bears his name was also founded by Mirrie Hill. Alfred Hill's service to Australian music was also recognised a number of times during his lifetime. In 1953, for example, he was an Officer of the Order of the British Empire and in 1960 he was appointed Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG).

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

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