E.J. CARROLL

(1868-1931) Born near Ipswich, Queensland, E.J. Carroll began his career in the entertainment industry in 1906 when he bought the rights to exhibit J. and N. Tait’s moving pictures in Queensland. Over the next few years he secured leases around Brisbane for the purposes of live theatre as well as film exhibition and skating and with George Birch started a chain of theatres throughout regional Queensland that catered for both theatre and film. In 1912 the pair began a partnership with T.V. Coyle in Charters Towers, and the following year Carroll moved to Sydney in order to take charge of a number of theatrical and cinematic interests. His ventures during the late 1910s included managing Scottish comedian Harry Lauder’s 1914 Australian tour and becoming involved in several classic Australian films – notably The Sentimental Bloke (1919) and Snowy Baker’s Australian "westerns" (including The Man From Kangaroo.) He also co-founded Carroll-Baker Australian Productions and with director Raymond Longford and actor/producer Lottie Lyall co-produced three further films, including On Our Selection (1920). In 1920 Carroll and his brother co-founded Carroll Musgrove Theatres and three years later they formalised Birch, Carroll and Coyle as a Limited company. E.J. Carroll remained active in both theatre and film until his death.

1874-1908

The second son of John Carroll (schoolteacher) and his wife Mary (née Dwyer), both from County Cork, Ireland, Edward John Carroll was born near Ipswich in the West Moreton District of South-East Queensland. He was educated at Redbank Plains State School, where his father was head teacher from 1874 to 1909. In 1883, Carroll joined the Queensland Department of Railways as a clerk. Some two years later he quit his job to join former variety theatre manager James Bell in setting up a fruit-merchant business in Gympie and later in Brisbane. Between 1901 and 1907, Carroll, Bell, and another businessman, Charles Stewart, held the catering contracts for railway refreshment rooms at Ipswich, Landsborough, and Gympie. Carroll and Stewart also took over the lease of Brisbane’s Albion Hotel in 1905.1

On 14 February 1906 Carroll married Jessie Dee on 14 February 1906 at St Stephen’s Cathedral, Brisbane. That same year his career as a theatre and cinema entrepreneur began to take shape following his successful negotiation with J. and N. Tait to exhibit their films in Queensland. In addition to documentary-style bio-pics such as Living London, Scotland and Ireland and boxing "kinomatograms" such as the Burns/Squires and Burns/Lang fights,2 the deal included the rights to several locally made feature-length films. The most popular of these were The Story of the Kelly Gang (1906) and Robbery Under Arms (1907). The success of this venture led Carroll to establish an open-air film circuit round Brisbane suburbs.

In his reflections on Carroll in 1950, Robert Cleland writes that the emerging entrepreneur's move into film exhibition was largely due to the influence of Post Mason.3 The American entertainer, producer and cinema pioneer, who had already established a strong association with Brisbane by this time, joined forces with Carroll in 1908 to secure the lease of the Brisbane Exhibition Ground for a series of Summer Continentals Advertising for these events identify Carroll as General Manager and Mason as Business Manager. Within a month the pair expanded their operations by leasing the South Brisbane Cricket Ground. In the hotter months, he opened his Summer Night Continentals at these venues, providing audiences with the best of local, Australian, and even international variety acts. That same year, Carroll co-produced, with Charles MacMahon and Messrs. Gunn, Osborne, and Jerdan, the classic Australian silent film For the Term of His Natural Life. He was also joined by younger brother Dan, who had worked for E. Rich and Co. Ltd in Brisbane since 1903.

1 Carroll and Stewart’s lease of the Albion Hotel continued until 1922. The business partners also bought the Criterion Hotel, Brisbane, in 1914.
3 Cleland, 7.
In addition to touring side-shows and vaudeville acts, the Carrolls built several skating-rinks in Brisbane and in rural centres. These were also used in summer for picture shows. Over the next few years, they gradually built up a chain of theatres throughout the state. By 1909, the brothers’ North Queensland interests were being run in partnership with George H. Birch, previously associated with the British Biograph Company (1908). Together, they established a permanent base of operations in Charters Towers, taking over the lease of the Olympia Theatre. One of the Carrolls’ more popular establishments in Brisbane around 1909 and 1910 was Earl’s Court, where Carroll’s Continentals presented live variety shows in combination with the latest films. They also built and opened an Earl’s Court venue in Rockhampton in 1910.

By 1912, the Carrolls and Birch, controlled most of the film exhibition halls in the major centres along the Queensland coastline. At the same time, they maintained an active interest in variety theatre. An advertisement in Australian Variety in 1913, for example, reads: “Birch and Carroll (Queensland). Theatrical and Picture managers, Playing Pictures and vaudeville in all the Principal Centres from Toowoomba to Charters Towers. Tours of legitimate companies managed over this route appearing in all the principal theatres of which we have the booking control.” Vaudeville managers such as Ted Holland and Brennan-Fuller Ltd had also begun leasing their acts to Birch and Carroll, rather than undertaking the tours themselves.

On 19 October 1912 Birch and Carroll amalgamated their picture operations at the Olympia Theatre, Charters Towers with T.V. Coyle, who was then the lessee of the Theatre Royal. This was the first joint venture between the three men whose company would later become Birch, Carroll and Coyle. The following year, E.J. Carroll moved his interests to Sydney, leaving Dan in charge of the Queensland enterprises. Under Dan Carroll’s management, the brothers soon afterwards purchased a frontage on Queen Street in Brisbane, where they planned to build an elaborately designed 1000-seat theatre at an estimated cost of £15,000. In late 1915 and early 1916, following the deaths of Ted Holland (in 1914) and Percy St John in 1915), the Carrolls briefly took over the management of the Empire Theatre, a popular variety theatre venue eventually taken over by Fullers Theatres Ltd. With Dan Carroll looking after the Queensland operations, E.J. Carroll began to bring British and American plays to Australia, as well as world-renowned artists. He had a major success in 1914, for example, with a tour by the Scottish entertainer (Sir) Harry Lauder. The pair became close friends.

Opening night of the first entrepreneurial venture by E.J. Carroll, G. H. Birch and T.V. Coyle.

Northern Miner (Charters Towers) 19 Oct. 1912, 1.

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4 Not to be confused with John N. Tait’s British Bioscope Company (ca. 1903).
5 See for example Northern Miner (Charters Towers, Qld) 4 Oct. 1909, 1.
6 Australian Variety (Sydney) 15 Oct. 1913, n. pag.
7 Northern Miner (Charters Towers, Qld) 19 Oct. 1912, 1. [See also page 4 in same issue.]
8 Australian Variety (Sydney) 13 May 1914, n. pag.
1918–1925

In 1918, the Carrolls invested in their first film production, *The Lure of the Bush*, starring R.L. 'Snowy' Baker, and it proved highly popular. They also undertook distribution in Australia and overseas of Raymond Longford's film *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919). Following its enormous commercial success they decided to enter production themselves. In partnership with Baker and South Australian firm the Southern Cross Feature Film Co. Ltd, the brothers formed Carroll-Baker Australian Productions in 1919 with capital of £25,000. To attract overseas distribution of their films, the company arranged for a team of Americans from Hollywood to form the nucleus of the production staff. Three "westerns" starring Baker were made, including *The Man from Kangaroo*, and released in 1920 with commercial success. The Carrolls also formed a production association with Longford and Lottie Lyell and made three films, including *On Our Selection* (1920).

In 1920, the brothers formed Carroll-Musgrove Theatres Ltd to build the Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney, which, from its opening in 1924, became one of Australia's leading cinemas. That same year, E.J. Carroll travelled overseas to market their films and to manage a world tour by Harry Lauder, but the brothers effectively ended their film production operations in 1921 after falling out with the Americans over their expensive production methods. The difficulty they had in ensuring adequate exhibition of their films in Australia and abroad was another contributing factor.

1923 saw Birch, Carroll and Coyle formalised as a Limited company, a move which allowed the company to better control and modernise its extensive theatre circuit in northern and coastal Queensland. The cinema interests of E.J. and Dan Carroll, often in association with the Tait brothers Tait brothers and Stuart Doyle, included a chain of Wintergarden theatres. The Carrolls remained active in live-theatre management and arranged Australian tours by major performers such as the Sistine Choir in 1922 and the violinist Fritz Kreisler in 1925.
**E. J. Carroll**

To produce Standard Potential made in Australia for the world's markets.

To send Films Export out of Australia as against the Foreign Film Assault that now comes in.

To Australianise Motion Pictures as against the Americanisation of the industry.

To make Australia realise that we can, three significant minutes in this country to entertain ourselves and the world.

Our intentions will be no more humanitarian ones but every day a step nearer Australia.

**Green Room** (Sydney) July 1920, 18.

**Dan Carroll and actress Dorothy Harris (1915)**

**Theatre Magazine** (Sydney) Dec. 1915, 45.

**Smith's Weekly** (Sydney) 4 Oct. 1919, 2.

**Green Room** (Sydney) Mar. 1920, 18.
1926-1931

In 1926, E.J. Carroll travelled to England, where he settled in London with his family. This also allowed his two sons the opportunity to continue their education there. He returned to Sydney in March 1931, but died of cancer at Lewisham Hospital barely four months after arriving back home. He was buried in the Catholic section of South Head Cemetery. Carroll's estate was valued for probate at £19,236 in Queensland and £17,461 in New South Wales. He was survived by his wife and two sons, Tex and John.

[The above biography has been sourced in part from the Andrew Pike and Martha Rutledge entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography (Vol 7), 571-572.]

SEE ALSO
• Dan Carroll • Birch and Carroll (aka Birch, Carroll & Coyle)

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS AND ANECDOTES

1915: George Carroll and E.J. Carroll are blanky good fellows. For one thing, they keep their word - which is more than a lot of the blanks do. Despite the fact that the Queensland halls are mostly engaged by Birch and Carroll they allow me to play there just as I had been doing for years. With more profitable results to themselves they could if they wished, close me out altogether (Harry Clay. Theatre Magazine Sept. 1915, 25).

1950: To rise from a humble railway clerk to an outstanding theatrical and concert entrepreneur, whose name was familiar in three continents, was the attainment of the late E.J. Carroll. His outstanding attributes for his success were his sincerity, sterling honesty, courtliness and generosity. He set the highest standards in business and never fell from them; a man of great heart whose personal charities were of such wide and universal extent that they will never all be known. His showman fingers were ever on the pulse of the public taste, and his enterprises were always launched on the grand scale with the methods of a man of vision (Robert A. Clelland. “Giants of the Past: E.J. Carroll.” Showman Oct. 1950, 7).

FURTHER REFERENCE

Birch, Carroll and Coyle Ltd. "Birch, Carroll and Coyle Information Kit." Brisbane, n. yr. [Company publicity document]
"Death of Mr E.J. Carroll." Telegraph (Brisbane) 29 July 1931, 9.
"'Lucky' Carroll Dead at 62." News (Adelaide) 29 July 1931, 11.
"New Moving Picture." Sydney Morning Herald 26 May 1921, 10.
"Obituary." Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette (Qld) 30 July 1931, 5.
"Super-Picture Theatre for Sydney: Carroll-Musgrove Project." Green Room (Sydney) June 1920, 18.