

ARTHUR H. ADAMS

(1872-1936) New Zealand journalist Arthur Adams collaborated with composer Alfred Hill on several cantatas and operettas between the mid-1890s and early 1900s, including *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1898) and *Tapu* (1903/04). He was employed as J.C. Williamson's literary secretary between 1898 and 1900, and over the next few decades wrote and staged a number of plays which had minor success - several in England where he lived briefly. He also worked as a journalist for the *Bulletin*, the *Lone Hand* (1909-1911) and the *Sydney Sun*. His most successful play, *Mrs Pretty and the Premier* (1914) was staged to some acclaim in London in 1916. Adams also published a number of novels and several collections of verse during his career. His first novel, *Tussock Land* was published in 1904, and the last, *A Man's Life* in 1929.

Born on 6 June 1872 in Lawrence, New Zealand, Arthur Henry Adams was educated at the Otago Boys' High School. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Otago (1894) he found employment as a journalist for Wellington's *Evening Post*. His collaborations with composer [Alfred Hill](#) began around the same period, and resulted in several music theatre works being created, including the operettas *The Whipping Boy* (1893) and *Hinemoa* (ca.1895). The latter was published in New Zealand in 1896. Sometime around 1897/98 the two started work on the comic opera *Tapu; Or, The Tale of a Maori Pahl*, which was based on a play Adams had written previously. He travelled to Australia shortly after completing the libretto and approached [J.C. Williamson](#) with a view to having the opera staged by his Firm. Impressed by the Adams' capabilities as a writer, the entrepreneur offered him a two year engagement as his literary secretary (ca.1898-1900). Taking over that position from Bernard Espinasse, Adams was paid at £200 per year. Despite his enthusiasm for the opera Williamson did not produce it until 1904, citing commitments to his enormously successful national tour of *The Geisha* as the reason for the delay. *Tapu's* first production was therefore mounted in New Zealand by the Pollard Opera Company. The premiere season was staged over six nights at the Opera House, Wellington beginning 16 February 1903. Pollard later toured the opera to Auckland and Tasmania. One of the earliest works created by Adams for Williamson was the 1898 pantomime, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*.¹

In 1900 Adams left Australia to cover the Boxer rebellion in China for several newspapers, including the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He then spent three years in England as a freelance journalist, and published his first novel, *Tussock Land* in 1904. That year also saw J.C. Williamson finally stage his own re-worked production of *Tapu*. Because the conditions of his contract with Adams stipulated that any of the author's writings during his two year engagement remained the property of Williamson, he authorised [David H. Souter](#) re-write the *Tapu* libretto in the romantic opera tradition, and also leaving out a number of contentious political and satirical incidents. Another Williamson employee, [Bert Royle](#), provided additional lyrics to accompany several pieces of new music by Hill. The Souter version premiered at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, on 9 July, followed by a season at Her Majesty's Theatre, Melbourne from 20 August. The libretto did not please Adams in the slightest, and he later raised his discontent at Williamson's involvement in the sabotage of his work on several occasions in *The Lone Hand* and *The Theatre*. Alfred Hill also stated in later years that he thought the Pollard production was superior to the Williamson version.



Source: National Library of Australia

During the early decades of the twentieth century Adams concentrated his writing talents on novels, occasionally writing under the pseudonyms James James and Henry James James. He also wrote poetry (a collection of his verse was published in 1913), and a number of dramatic plays, including *The Tame Cat*. First staged at the Criterion, Sydney, on 11 July 1908, it was later revised and staged at the same theatre on 16 October 1909 as a benefit to the Australian Bush District Nurses Association.² Other dramatic works known to have been produced on the stage include *Pierrot in Australia*, a one act play produced at the [Royal Standard](#), Sydney, on 19 October 1910; *The Wasters*, which premiered at the Unley City Hall, Adelaide, 27 Aug. 1910; and *Mrs Pretty and the Premier*, a three act comedy staged at the Athenaeum Hall by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre on 26 September 1914. *The Wasters* and *Mrs Pretty and the Premier*, along with *Galahad Jones*, were also published in 1914 under the collective title *Three Plays for the Australian Stage*, while *Pierrot in Australia* was later published in the *Australian Soldier's Gift Book* (1918). A poetic drama, *The Minstrel*, undertaken in collaboration with composer Carlien Jurs, was written around 1908, and later staged at the Conservatorium of Music in Adelaide.

Unfortunately, Adams' theatrical output never matched his enthusiasm. In this respect he found it enormously difficult to get his theatrical works produced by professional managements in Australia, a problem shared by many other local

¹ *Ali Baba* premiered at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, on Boxing Night 1898.

² The revivals was reportedly at the request of Her Excellency the Countess of Dudley.

writers during the same period. Adams' raised this issue throughout his career as a journalist and editor - a career that included positions with the *Bulletin*, beginning in 1906 as a journalist then as writer/editor of the magazine's "Red Page" (ca. Nov. 1907 to 1909). He later wrote for *The Lone Hand* (1909-11) and *Sydney Sun*, before returning to the *Bulletin*, where he cemented his position as one of the country's most respected literary critics.



Source: Helen Bones.

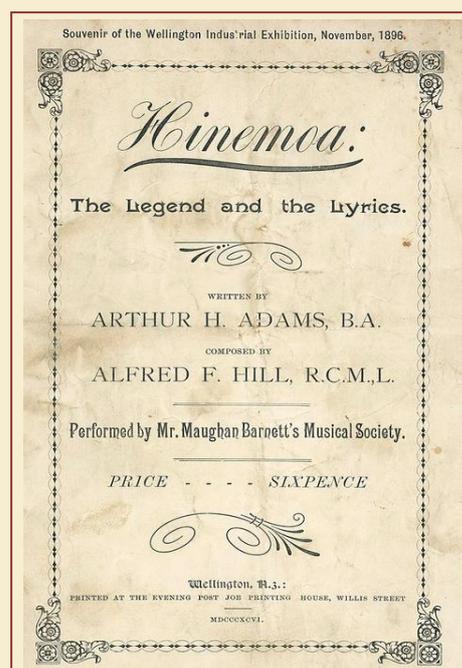
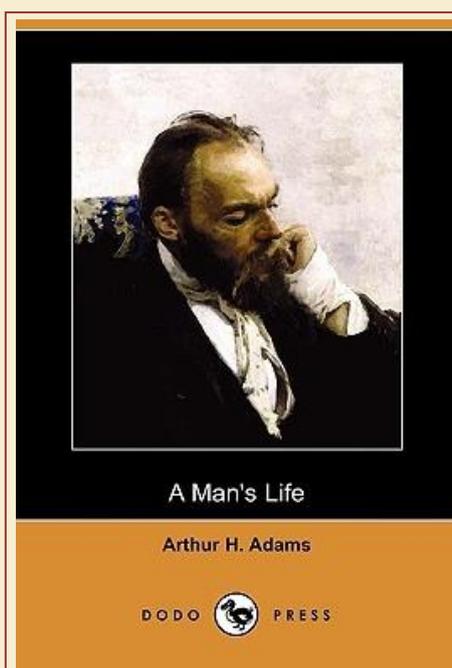
Despite the bias Adams faced as an Australian-based writer, he nevertheless succeeded in getting most of his plays before the public at one time or another. His most successful play, *Mrs Pretty and the Premier* was produced in London in 1916 and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) later adapted it for radio broadcast. His last play *Gallipoli Bill* was staged at a suburban Sydney theatre in 1926. The script was sold to Bert Bailey for a possible film adaptation, but the Great Depression put this possibility on hold indefinitely. Two novels were published under his real name during the 1920s, *The Australians* (1920) and *A Man's Life* (1929), the last being a fictionalised autobiography that explores themes he was passionate about, notably the tension between romantic idealism and sexuality, and the subjugation of women in both marriage and society. Several of his novels, including *The Australians*, are also set in pre-World War I Sydney. In 1933, after several years of great financial difficulties he was granted assistance through the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Adams died in the Royal North Shore Hospital, in Sydney on 4 March 1936 from a combination of septicaemia and pneumonia. He left behind his wife, Lillian, a son Peter, and two daughters, Suzette and June.

Arthur H. Adams' position in the annals of Australasian theatre is recognised not only through his efforts as a writer but also through his strong support of Australian playwrights and librettists. In this respect he was a loud critic of the leading actor/managers and theatrical entrepreneurs who controlled the Australian stage, and who he argued were exceedingly indifferent to local writers. He was not content to just criticise, however. He would often offer advice to aspiring playwrights on how to approach their craft – not just on how to write, but also on how to get their work produced. His involvement in the local drama industry also saw him undertake various off-stage activities, including a position on the advisory board of the Sydney Repertory Society around 1913, alongside Alfred Hill and David H. Souter. He and Hill's keen interest in New Zealand's indigenous music and customs saw them attempt to celebrate the unique sounds and rich cultural heritage of the Maori people by experimenting with Maori music and English romantic history. Adams later found his forte in urban social comedy in which he tried to deal Australian themes, with Australian characters, and from an Australian point of view. The *Theatre* magazine critic, for example, wrote of Adams' 1909 production of *The Tame Cat*: "In spite of its faults, the best attempt at an Australian play [we know] of. It is so good that it is a great pity it is not better."³

[The above biography has been sourced in part from B.G. Andrews and Ann-Mari Jordens' entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*]



The Theatre: An Illustrated Monthly
(Sydney) Nov. 1909, 14.



³ "Sydney Comedy," 14.

MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

- 1893:** *The Whipping Boy* (operetta) with Alfred Hill.
ca.1895 *Hinemoa* (operetta) with Alfred Hill.
1898 *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (pantomime) with Leon Caron, Alfred Hill and George Pack.
1903 *Tapu* (operetta/romantic opera) with David Souter; Mus. Alfred Hill)
ca.1908 *The Minstrel* (poetic drama) with Carlien Jurs

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