

# *A Horse, a Singer and a Prince — two busy months in the life of Pietermaritzburg*

The intersection, in the life of a single city, of three very different characters, each come and gone in a matter of days, can spotlight the culture and milieu of that city—in this case, Pietermaritzburg—which the official record might miss. Of the trio of characters here recalled, one might say that the city was in a fair state of titillation well before the scheduled visits of the singer and of the prince, but that the horse only achieved fame in retrospect. In 2008, however, it is probably more widely known that a horse once won the Comrades Marathon than that Natal produced a singer who became something of a by-word in the twenties and thirties, the era of Ivor Novello.

On April 7th 1925 *The Natal Witness* announced the imminent arrival in Natal of its girl-made-good, the mezzo-soprano Garda Hall. The paper cites the recent comment of one London critic that, ‘for sympathy and warmth, I prefer her to Galli Curci’. (In 1925, Amelita Galli-Curci was the *diva par excellence*—the leading exponent of Italian coloratura, so this was no faint praise!) Accolades like this cast in a most unexpected light the former pupil of Girls’ Collegiate who had left Pietermaritzburg only five years before with the reputation (as became evident, when the school searched its records) of being consistently ejected from singing classes for singing out of tune.

It must be admitted, of course, that if quantity of newsprint was anything to go by, Miss Hall’s home-coming was quite overshadowed by the scheduled visit of the heir to the British throne, Edward, Prince of Wales. When it became known that it would be in Maritzburg and Maritzburg alone that Edward would open an agricultural show on his tour, local excitement knew no bounds. Extraordinary claims were voiced and counter-voiced—that the prince was a beef-farmer with a preference for shorthorns, that he was a dog-lover with a fixation on Welsh Terriers. One correspondent declared that it would be ‘a definite and graceful act of loyalty’ to refrain from shaking the royal

hand, so as to save further strain on ‘one who does not spare himself...’ (In fact, when Edward arrived in Cape Town after long tours of Canada and Nigeria, he was often seen to use his left hand in greeting.) A vulgar statistician promptly informed the *Witness* that, though the prince might indeed have performed a thousand handshakes at a single ceremony, President Coolidge had recently shaken hands with 1,869 people in 45 minutes, at the rate of 49 a minute.

Nevertheless, for all this swelling royalist ardour, there was a discernible tremor of excitement when the Maritzburg public learned, on April 14th, that Garda Hall had arrived by mailship, and was staying with her parents at *Seecliffe*, Winklespruit, prior to giving her first concert in Durban. That event duly took place, and was greeted by the leading Durban critic with the announcement that ‘her voice and artistry far exceeded anything that I had been led to expect’.



*‘South Africa’s best singer and ‘Maritzburg’s very own’, said the Natal Witness of this portrait of Garda Hall, then in her mid-twenties.*

Came April 22nd 1925 and Garda Hall’s homecoming to the city in which she had grown up and received her first music lessons. Curiosity was intense. In the words of the paper: ‘those who remember the girl who left five years ago to seek training and fame in London will be able to judge for themselves as to the beauty of the voice that has found so much commendation amongst the London critics’ — critics who are usually ‘sparing in their praises and free with their criticism’.

A composite portrait begins to emerge in the run-up to the concert. Says one columnist: ‘The question of Miss Hall’s birth place might well be called a “Tale of Two Cities”, for although she was born in Durban she came to Maritzburg when she was seven and lived in the city, receiving her education at the Girls’ Collegiate School, and her first lessons at the hands of local masters.’ (I suspect that, in 1925, even the most zealous mistresses would be called ‘masters’.) She departed, in her own words ‘a very poor mezzo soprano’, some five years ago. Apparently it was after only a year or two at the Royal Academy that her reputation began to spread. ‘She has since then recorded success after success, until now when her services are in such demand that she has been, prior to her trip out here, singing at five or six concerts a week...’

Maritzburg was ready for a gala occasion, and a gala occasion it certainly got. On the morning paper’s front page, usually given to imperial and international news, a headline read ‘Remarkable scenes at the Town Hall’. A hall that was designed for 1 200 brimmed with 1 500 for the concert. Every seat was taken, the organ steps were crowded, and many had to stand. Bouquets were literally showered on the singer. She gave Maritzburg, said the paper, ‘the greatest treat it has had for years.’

Next day came the more sober write-up by the regular columnist. Even he was pressed to say that he had never ‘expected to see such a remarkable gathering. Leaders of society, music lovers, school girls, the man in the street who rarely goes to concerts in these days of the cinema—all were there, awaiting the appearance of the young Maritzburg girl who has made good in London and has added to the laurels gained by South Africans in the world’s metropolis.’ Miss Hall launched the concert straight off

with an aria from *Rigoletto*, leaving the local critic ‘marvelling at the tremendous work she must have done to attain the wonderful ease of production which characterises her singing.’ This critic (he signed himself ‘Jongleur’) certainly revelled in the occasion. Noting that Miss Hall had, ‘besides an exceptional voice, a most attractive and winsome personality’ he added that the silence after her last note was not merely the negative of sound, it was a ‘positive entity’!

The little Maritzburg orchestra was roundly appreciated by singer and audience alike, but, at the end of the concert, accompanied by piano only, she treated the audience to some lighter numbers. Amongst these were some of the songs that she went on to record with His Master’s Voice in 1926—pieces that are somewhat dated, now, but still retrievable from the HMV archives.<sup>1</sup> One has to say that, with the swishing background of 1920s’ 78s, the result can hardly be called the ‘negative of sound’! The voice that emerges, however, has remarkable clarity and brightness, and the singing is as much a tribute to Miss Hall’s elocution teacher as to anyone more musical. She brought the Maritzburg evening to a close with ‘Poor Wandering One’ from *The Pirates of Penzance*.



Another Natalian who had recently created a stir over in London was the 42-year-old athlete and long-distance runner Arthur Newton, sometime Michaelhouse schoolmaster and then a farmer at Harding. Newton did not in fact run the very first Comrades of 1921, but his pre-eminence in the following years was so striking that he is today often cited as the ‘father’ of the Comrades. After setting a new record for the up run in 1924, he travelled to England to test his prowess in the famous 52-mile London to Brighton roadrace. This certainly gave the Natal farmer a world stage. Not only did he set a new record for that event, but a new world-time for a distance of 50 miles, namely 5hrs, 53 mins and 43 secs.

In those days the Comrades marathon was run on an ordinary working day in the last week of May, in this case the Monday before Empire Day. Needless to say the local readership, aware that it now had an international celebrity in its midst, speculated at length how Newton would fare in this, his fourth Comrades. ‘Will Newton run on Monday?’ asked the headline on the Athletics page. Apparently he had developed a serious muscular strain in one leg, and would spend Sunday deciding whether he could start with the runners on Monday. His drill was to run, typically, 20 miles a day, or about 500 a month. This last month, however, he had only run 116 miles, and had shortly beforehand given up (said the agitated reporter) after merely two miles. We must remember that, in 1925, the Comrades race was itself only four years old, and all the present-day hype about the ‘Comrades’ spirit’ was not yet part of the vernacular. Nevertheless Newton gave a hint of it when he declared that he would run even if he were not in 100% form. ‘I should of course be beaten by several of the competitors but I am quite capable of enjoying the joke with the best of them.’

Came Monday morning, and mounting speculation as to what Newton would do. Early-morning trams were laid on to get supporters to the starting point. The fame of the race was already such that a large crowd (including, says the *Witness*, a large female contingent) huddled at the intersection of Church Street and Commercial Road to hear Mayor Sanders call out ‘go’ on the last stroke of six.

Off went the runners, Arthur Newton included. In 1925 there was no problem of the ‘bunching’ of the field—there were only twenty starters! The onlookers were beginning to disperse when, three minutes later, an extraordinary apparition advanced on the starting line. 67-year-old Mr George Cookman Robinson, farmer of *Middlefield* near Rietvlei, arrived atop a thoroughbred hunter, which he had appositely named Why Not. There had been no press forewarning of this variation, so it was hardly fair of the *Mercury* to report that: ‘There appeared to be very little interest in this phase of the contest and the major portion of the crowd did not wait to see the horse start.’ What the *Witness* said was that the rider came past the Town Hall ‘in the half light of dawn’ on a chestnut horse. ‘The horse was very fresh and excited and was trying to make a faster pace than the rider wanted.’ Farmer Robinson (a descendant, by the way, of the first editor of the *Natal Mercury*, George Edgcombe Robinson) had apparently been provoked by the claim that ‘Newton would kill a horse’. He had decided to give Why Not some training sessions on his farm in the previous months. (It is not recorded whether Why Not was so called before he was chosen for this historic mission.) Mr Robinson’s unusual entry in the field had the support of the Comrades’ organiser, Mr. Vic Clapham, whose stipulation was simply that the horse should start after the runners so as not to increase the bunching.

In 2008 we should not be patronising about the times that were achieved in the Comrades of those days. In 1925 the road from Maritzburg to Durban was almost completely untarred—to the extent that Newton, at one point, ‘couldn’t see 20 feet in any direction on account of the dust’. In those days, too, the hour-by-hour state of the race could only be gauged by faint messages from party-line telephones that were strung along the route. First reports indicated that the horse had covered the first 22 miles in two hours and was well ahead of the runners. From Drummond came the news not only that the horse was ahead of leader Harry Phillips, but that Phillips himself was a mile ahead of Newton. With time in hand at Drummond, Why Not’s owner gave the horse a good rub-down and permitted a bottle of stout to be added to its water. ‘This,’ said the spectators, ‘must have been of very fine quality, judging from the animal’s performance thereafter...’ (In the light of modern Athletics, I wonder whether Why Not would have passed a drugs test.)

As it turned out, Why Not came into Durban a good 80 minutes before Newton. It would not have been known, at that point, that the human runner was running his fastest Comrades ever, setting a record that was not surpassed for another 12 years. The singular eruption of Mr Robinson on his horse in the streets of Durban was too early to cause a stir. ‘There was no applause for the valiant horse’ says the *Mercury*, for the Durban crowd was not yet even lining up for the runners. In fact, if one sizes up the newsprint that was spent on the occasion, it seems the equine victory might well have been forgotten if Newton himself had not made a feature of it. Newton came in at 6 hrs 24 mins—31 minutes better than his ‘down’ record of two years earlier, and 40 minutes ahead of the lagging Harry Phillips. (One must again recall the condition of the road in those days—only eight runners came in in under nine hours.)

The Durban crowd may not have been ready for Why Not, but they certainly were ready for Arthur Newton. Even the workmen busy building the new Stuttafords in West Street stopped their labours to cheer him through. Says the *Mercury*: ‘there was little doubt amongst the spectators that they were watching the world’s greatest long-distance



*Why Not looks as breezy as ever posing next to his owner, George Cookman Robinson, and (far right) the man he beat on the 1925 down run, the famous Arthur Newton. The Esplanade statue of Dick King provides an appropriate backdrop.*

runner.' On reaching the finishing line Newton made what today would be the thoroughly incorrect gesture of asking for a pipe. When no pipe was available he settled for a cigar. What was particularly gracious about this modest hero was that he then sought out Mr Robinson and his fresh-as-a-daisy horse, in order to shake the rider's hand. The photograph that survives is a family treasure; in the local press there was no photograph at all. It must have been taken next day, with a much recovered Arthur Newton in a suit, a stern Mr Robinson in his jodhpurs and riding boots, and Why Not looking as fresh as a bottle of stout might have made him. The photograph, you notice, has been taken, appropriately, in front of the statue of Natal's epic horse-ride hero, Dick King.

Three other amazing things about Arthur Newton in 1925: in June he and a Mr Henriksen pushed a heavy wood-and-brass government measuring wheel all the way from the Maritzburg Town Hall to the Durban Town Hall to establish the exact distance of the Comrades race: 54 miles and 670 yards. Then in August Newton settled any doubts as to his world-class status by running solo to Durban, beating his own Comrades' record with a time of 6 hrs and 14 mins, and setting, along the way, three new world records for 30, 40 and 50 mile distances. But the strangest item in the Newton story comes out in a letter to the *Witness* that he wrote shortly thereafter. It transpired that Newton had an ulterior motive in drawing public attention to himself, and one that had nothing to do with long-distance running. He wanted to protest against the injustice he believed

he was suffering having his farmlands near Harding expropriated by the state. For all the lustre of his name he did not win this particular battle, and he left Natal that year to settle in Bulawayo.



But now the likes of Arthur Newton and Garda Hall rapidly took back-page status as the city prepared to entertain Edward, Prince of Wales. One must remember that the readers of the *Witness* were now living under the Nationalist Party/Labour Party Pact government of General Hertzog. Their 'birthright' confidence in the power and ambience of Empire was considerably under strain. General Hertzog was diplomatic enough to send a telegram to *HMS Hood* as it steamed down the west coast, assuring the prince of South Africa's warmest welcome. (If we talk of the 'ambience of empire' here, it is indicated, for example, in the *Witness*'s casual mention that Maritzburg's Show Week would see the opening, at Scott's Theatre, of a show then playing in London's West End, 'Clothes and the Woman', starring Iris Hoey. The ambience of 1925 can be sampled in various *Witnesses* and *Mercurys* for these months. Glancing through the fashion pages one finds endless attention to the latest feminine styles, complete with instructions how to 'bob' one's hair with that familiar 1920s curl forwards at both sides of the chin. (Readers were not concerned, apparently, with the news that, at the University of Vienna, some 'bobbed' female students were thrown off campus, because the look was a 'Jewish' invention.) On the motor-car pages one is quite astonished at the range of cars that were then locally available—not just Fords and Austins but the Paige-Jewett, the Bean, the Oakland, the Durant, the Rugby, the 8-cylinder Hupmobile, the Italian Ansaldo, the Willys-Knight, the Maxwell and so on. (Studebaker boasted that their 'Duplex' could be converted from an open to a closed saloon in 30 seconds, simply by raising a hood.) The cheapest car was the Gray at £235—this in an era when the cheapest voyage to England from Durban cost £30. (A BSA bicycle cost ten guineas—£10 10s, so the boat-fare was about three times the cost of a standard bicycle.)

In 1925 the technological breakthrough that unified the imperial audience was not the petrol engine but radio—the 'wireless' as it was referred to for decades to come. Such being the state of technology, the *Witness*'s readers had every hope that they would hear Edward's first words when he stepped ashore at Cape Town on April 30th. Next day's paper of May 1st shows huge crowds gathered outside the *Witness* offices in Longmarket Street, all poised for a technological breakthrough. The prince's voice was to be relayed by telephone all the way from Cape Town to Durban, and from that point radioed up to Pietermaritzburg. One imagines someone holding a telephone receiver near the dais where HRH stood, and then a long succession of manual exchanges all the way to Natal, bringing the long-awaited voice to its patriotic audience. The *Witness* had no hesitation in calling it 'the world's longest telephone relay', and crowds gathered in such proportion that Longmarket Street had to be closed to vehicular traffic.

Alas!—the prince's voice, in its local rendering, was all but inaudible, and one had to rely more on good faith to hear him than on radio technology. However, on May 5th a letter to the paper informed Maritzburg that if the crowd had only moved to Burger Street, two blocks away, it would have got much better reception! That's how critical 'tuning' was in those days—a different result from street to street. What Burger Street's

superior reception revealed, however, was a hitch in the ‘world’s longest telephone relay’, and that of a very human variety. Said the Burger Street correspondent:

Everybody was on the tip-toe of expectation. First came the Mayor of Cape Town’s speech, delivered like a parson at a grave-side, and which must have reduced the prince to tears. And then the Durban broadcaster intervened to say that in a minute or two we would hear the prince speak. ‘Will it be a tenor voice? It’s not likely to be a bass. He is a little man, probably a boyish baritone. Will he have the Eton drawl?’

And then, at the height of expectation, what should happen but that a conversation started up between two remote telephone exchanges, one male, the other female. ‘When are you coming?’ ‘Oh, I’m going away on Tuesday...’ ‘Really! Wish I was going...’ To the great frustration of the gathered audience this went on for some minutes, until somebody at last plugged in the correct connection, and the loyal subjects got to hear the final words of the prince’s speech. Fortunately, their effect was reassuring. Says our Burger Street radio-phile: ‘We heard sufficient to decide that the timbre of the voice is a good, strong, incisive baritone, not a throaty tenor and with nothing boyish about it...’ As for the humble technician who had inserted the wrong plug: ‘Personally, I feel that ordinary murder would be much too light a punishment...’

Through the month of May the *Witness* readership was far too busy following the prince’s marathon through the Union of South Africa to celebrate the horse’s marathon of the same month. What became evident, during this royal progress, was that the diplomatic prince wooed the Afrikaans section of the country as much as the English, and made an unexpectedly large impression on the black population, which often turned up in numbers larger than any white contingent in order to see him. At Umtata 30,000 Xhosas turned out, and a *Witness* leader, a little anxious about Edward’s preference for casual lounge suits, advised that the opportunity should not be lost for ‘the immense impression made on the native mind by the appearance of the prince and his staff in the full panoply of war’. At Bethlehem, on his way down to Natal, he noticed a ‘native’ ‘tin whistle’ band gathered on the platform, and asked them to play to him. The ensuing cacophony obliterated the fact that this was a rendering of ‘God Save the King’, so no-one stood to attention.

Eventually Edward reached Natal. He was lionised in Durban (as witness the famous incident when, introduced to the pupils of Durban Ladies’ College, he said, ‘But these aren’t ladies, they’re just young girls’, upon which the school promptly changed its name to the Durban Girls’ College). Soon the special train took him to Eshowe, capital of Zululand. Quite a literature could be amassed about this particular visit. Fifty thousand Zulus assembled there for the dance of a lifetime, and there was a sort of running ambiguity as to whether it was Edward, Prince of Wales, or Solomon, King of the Zulus, who was actually the drawcard. In 1925 Solomon owned four cars, each one driven by a white chauffeur. At Eshowe he arrived in a blue open saloon with leopard-skin seats — grander than anything the sugar barons produced for the prince! Letters criss-crossed after the Eshowe visit, some blaming the whites for exceptional rudeness during the praise-oratory of the Zulus, and others complaining of Solomon’s taunting disposition, almost flicking a whisk directly at the prince.

Incidentally, railway aficionados will be interested to learn that we nearly lost the Imperial heir as the royal train coiled down the hills from Eshowe to the coast. Apparently

the bogey of the second-to-last coach became derailed. Fortunately the train was moving so sedately that it could rapidly be halted. The whole entourage thereupon trans-shipped to the pilot train ahead. That evening the prince calmed all nerves by having a ‘smokers’ concert’ on the train, making available his own ukelele for the festivity.



Meanwhile the question as to what to do with the prince when he arrived in Maritzburg was raising considerable controversy. A letter of 19th May, written by no less a personality than one of the city’s top physicians, Dr Oddin-Taylor, expressed shock and dismay at the discovery that there was a plan afoot to send Edward down Commercial Road to open the Royal Show in a ricksha. Dr Oddin-Taylor found the idea quite intolerable: ‘One can hardly imagine anything which could be more likely to create an extremely bad impression amongst the natives than that they should see their future king being treated in this facetious manner...’ He was supported next day by Mr Roy Hathorn who said it was like ‘the unthinkable idea of the King being asked to ride a bicycle in a State procession.’ The *Witness* confirmed that the ricksha proposal, so far from being dropped, had received official sanction, and had been submitted to the prince.

It transpired that the applicant was the Students’ Representative Council of Natal University College. They were much impressed by the fact that the University of Cape Town Rag committee had put the prince on an ox-wagon for his triumphal ride into Cape Town—a festivity which he seemed to enjoy. The *Witness* was assured that ‘the “rag”’ would not have ‘the boisterous elements usual on such occasions’, and would simply be a procession of decorated rickshas. The hauling of the princely ricksha would be deputed to the most picturesque ricksha-man of the day, rather unfortunately named ‘Whisky’. (Another version was that the students themselves would do the pulling. It seems that the word ‘students’ had the same effect then as it has today. One reader growled: ‘If such a thing is attempted, I hope doctors will line the route...’) For all those first reactions, the SRC’s idea seemed to be well on the way to success. On May 25th a letter from the prince’s entourage announced that he had agreed to the ‘rag’ on Thursday the 11th. This gave the *Natal Witness* excellent opportunity to encourage a major debate. On May 26th a column appeared: ‘What the Public Thinks’.

What surprises us all these years later is the class feeling that was evident in this debate. Says one correspondent, referring back to Messrs. Oddin-Taylor and Hathorn, ‘Both letters savour too much of the Victoria Club...The prince is not out here on a state procession. He has had enough of the stiff-back business at home...I feel the ricksha ride will have more lasting and more pleasing recollections for him than a ride in anyone’s motor car.’ In the same vein there was a colourful pronouncement from G. Scott-Riddell of Howick.

Our dear old ‘Maritzburg still contains some specimens of the now happily obsolete and small-minded person, the snob, for none but a snob could possibly see anything undignified or unseemly in the picturesque ricksha, pulled by a picturesque and not unworthy member of a very fine race...A well got-up ricksha puller is as pretty and interesting a character as the world holds, and to be drawn by human hands surely is a greater tribute than a merely mechanical or common-or-garden motor car...

So the ideological battle raged until as late as June 6th, only a few days before the prince's arrival. On that day, however, the Rag Committee wrote to the paper to say that 'an unfortunate *contretemps* has arisen' and 'permission has been refused the students to "process" in the streets... We have no alternative but to abandon the project.' (One suspects that if Edward, Prince of Wales, *had* arrived at the Maritzburg Showgrounds in a ricksha, the city would have earned a little more glory in the immortality stakes...)

Edward's subsequent biography has tended to sour the memory even of his successful years as the travelling servant of the Empire. There was no doubt that, in terms of immediate report, Natal simply glowed in proximity to the prince. It seems he was perfectly aware of the diplomacy that 1925 demanded. For instance, he said in his speech when he arrived: 'Here in Maritzburg you have the proud traditions of those splendid Voortrekkers whose tracks I have been following very closely ever since I left Cape Town.' He had (he said) been in Natal for just over a week and could hardly ask us to accept him here as a Natalian so soon, but the hospitality he had received encouraged him to believe that, at any rate, he was no stranger amongst us. (Cheers). He said he was under handicap and had to get many of his impression of this marvellous country from the train, but one week in Natal such as he had experienced — and he had travelled through the glorious scenery of the Drakensberg and through the gorgeous country between Durban and Maritzburg — had been enough for him to realise why this Province was called the Garden Colony...

On the public dais he seemed to touch just the right note. Even when he got to the Show on Thursday the 11th, he realised that his job was to import the imperial perspective. Natal farmers were part of a nation — 'especially when the animals exhibited come from all parts of the Union, and are representative of some of the finest herds and flocks in the country...' But the nation itself was part of a larger whole. The markets opened to them by the Empire must lead to no complacency: 'The development of the unpopulated spaces of this vast land demands that the most up-to-date machinery and methods should be used, if you are to compete successfully with farmers in other countries...'

It was often remarked during the 1925 visit that the demeanour of the prince was a slightly sad one. In uniform he did not cut an upright dashing figure, but took on the slightly bowed form of the humble servant. Like many 1920s personalities, a double-edge was discernible between a jazz-age love of life after a horrific war, but, on the other hand, an appreciation of the sacrifice that had made this good life possible. So when Edward doffed his endless set of uniforms, he became a very focused polo-player, and, for the female faction of his vast audience, a lounge-suited glamour-boy (slightly assisted by built-up shoes). To quote the gossip columns, he was 'an exceptionally versatile dancer with a variety of steps. He is said to have a preference for the "toddle", a step he probably picked up in America...'

On the Wednesday evening of Show Week, Pietermaritzburg hosted no fewer than three dances on the same evening — the Administrator's official Grand Ball at the Town Hall, the Railways and Harbours Ball at the Masonic Hall, and a Regimental Ball at the Sons of England Hall. Edward was guest of honour at the first, but — to the delight of the town — he called in on all three, and danced with partners that (says the paper) 'he himself selected'. The *Witness* had a field day collecting various women's comments: 'He's a darling'; 'Every look is a thrill'. Perhaps Maritzburg did not field quite the feminine devotion of the Durban schoolgirl whose glove he had kissed, and who

thereafter allowed her friends to queue up and kiss it for days afterwards... The Oddfellows' ball was the least formal, and it was reported that he mingled with the dancers and 'thoroughly enjoyed his 40 minute stay'. During one of the dances 'it was noticed that the prince was singing with great gusto "It ain't gonna rain no more", and he especially complimented the orchestra, and asked for each member to be presented...'

But the thrill of being suddenly singled out by Prince Charming occurred at the Administrator's ball. Here one Zoë Rawlinson, a secretarial assistant in the town, was moving from partner A to partner B between dances. Suddenly there was a touch on her arm, and there was the heir apparent asking her for the next dance. (Needless to say, partner B didn't stand a chance.) She said to reporters next day that 'they had three dances during which he made her feel completely at ease with his excellent dancing and relaxed chatter. He danced a number of original steps I had never danced before.' One notices that Edward was, again and again, capable of putting a company at ease. After the various dances he would stroll out to the corridors, smoking and smiling while he smoked. Whilst dancing with Miss Rawlinson, he went over to the band and asked for 'Show me the way to go Home' (a 'loaded' request?) which he was fond of dancing to.

The mythology that subsequently grew up around Edward's visit certainly had some less flattering reports but, while it was on, Maritzburg revelled in it. Even as the prince left the town a signalman at the Maritzburg North signal cabin called out to him as the train slowly passed 'You must be glad, sir, it is all over.' 'No', said the prince with a beaming smile, 'I am rather sorry'. 'O, no, you can't be...' 'Yes, I am very sorry', said the prince. And with that the train steamed off to Merrivale, where he won favour with a huge crowd of Howick schoolchildren by getting their headmaster to agree to a half-holiday.



Meanwhile Maritzburg, with hardly time to draw breath, knew that in the midst of these imperial excitements, Garda Hall would be giving her second and final concert at the end of Show Week. So there was 'Clothes and the Woman' from the London West End at Scott's Theatre, there was the itinerant prince calling in at various civic balls, there was Boswell's Circus, doing its regular showtime routine, and there was also the travelling piano impresario Mark Hambourg—a sort of Liberace of his day—all vying for public attention. But meanwhile there was Garda Hall. It was not only in her home province that she had been garnering rave reviews. The *Rand Daily Mail* for June 11th reported: 'Miss Hall's voice is sheer allurements of timbre, and in clarity and flexibility is one of the most remarkable heard in a local concert hall for many years. Big arias like Delibes' 'Bell Song' and Verdi's *A fors a lui* held every vocal distinction...'

A strange notice appeared in the *Witness* for June 9th saying that Garda Hall would love to meet old friends in country districts with a view to giving 'private renditions'. Interested parties should contact JE Hall of Hall's Motor Works.<sup>2</sup>

That she could yet again fill the Town Hall at the end of this momentous week is no small testimony. As columnist 'Jongleur' reported, 'In spite of all the other festivities of the week, and the consequent state of exhaustion prevalent amongst most people, the Town Hall seating capacity was filled to the uttermost...' From 'Jongleur', however, we

get the first suggestion that, though the ‘charming presence and manner’ is still there, and that the ‘beautiful lilting phrases’ in her Verdi are ‘pure joy to listen to’, Maritzburg’s golden girl might peak a little earlier than her sunny career promised. This comes out in his report on the Delibes ‘Bell Song’: ‘one felt that, owing to the cold weather, the artist did not produce this with as great a success as she is wont...’ He goes on:

It seems a hard-hearted thing to say, but one could almost wish some sorrow to befall the artist, that she may be able to sound the depths of life and so gain that sympathetic timbre which is all that is needful to make her a really great singer. The gifts are there, but the experience of life has not yet come to her. It would be foolish to press the hand of fate, so at present we may revel in the joyous youth of her singing...

So the cold June wind was not the real problem—or was it in fact a touch of ice in Miss Garda Hall’s voice that was her real talent? She ended the concert with the minor ditty, ‘Soft-footed Snow’ by Signidi Lei, ‘... a gem of music’, says ‘Jongleur’, ‘glistening with the coldness of snow and ice. It suited Miss Hall’s voice to perfection...’

Garda Hall returned to London to be taken up by His Master Voice, and to become a top soprano, very much in demand on the oratorio circuit. How she teamed up with Webster Booth for Coronation concerts at the accession of—not Edward VIII but George VI—belongs to another story. But Jongleur of *The Natal Witness* was eventually proved correct. A few recorded ditties in the HMV archives give evidence of a delightfully fresh but essentially light voice, and Garda Hall’s career was soon to be narrowed by the huge events of 1939–1945, when it was the lot of the singer to be the public entertainer rather than the rising star. On the Webster Booth website (expertly maintained by the Johannesburg musician Jean Collen) one learns that Garda Hall did survive the war, and is last mentioned in a *Musicians’ Who’s Who* gardening at her London flat in the late forties. At least the Collegiate schoolgirl accrued enough in her concert life to live in comfort, even if she never quite displaced Amelita Galli-Curci.

BILL BIZLEY

#### NOTES

1. The author is particularly grateful to André de Swart for his research in the London EMI studios, and the transcription on to CD of three of these ditties.
2. In 2005, the family of the present AG Hall group, seem not to be connected with the Hall that I, as a schoolboy cyclist, would have associated with Halls Cycle Works, the predecessor to Jowett’s Cycles. So what connection Garda Hall had to JE Hall of Hall’s Motor Works I cannot trace.