

A History of the Royal South Street Society of Ballarat

By the late L. A. Blackman, M.C.*

(An address to the Society on Tuesday evening, 18th June, 1963.)

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The history of what is now known as the Royal South Street Society is a most fascinating one, particularly for those who have even the slightest interest in the arts. It was in 1879 that William Duguid Hill, then a young man of about 17 years of age, became imbued with the idea of forming a group of young men in Ballarat to indulge in debating and literary activities. Perhaps his second name (Duguid) was responsible for this idea, but he certainly was true to his name. His mother, Mrs. Robina Hill, conducted the *Carriers' Arms* Hotel in South Street, Ballarat, at the time, and on 10th July, 1879, this young man induced eight others of about his own age to attend a meeting in a room of his mother's hotel for the purpose of forming this society. They decided to meet every Friday night, under the name of the South Street Literary and Debating Society. They were all scholars at the Central State Night School No. 33, in Dana Street, Ballarat, under the guidance of Mr. J. S. Charles. Who were the first office-bearers of this society? William D. Hill was elected its first president, Theo Saunders its vice-president, and John Menzies its secretary and treasurer. In the following year Mr. Hill was appointed secretary, and he held that position thereafter until his death in 1921.

At the first meeting of the society a syllabus was prepared, and its subsequent meetings were so successful that in the next few years many other young men's societies flourished in Ballarat. The South Street Literary and Debating Society soon began to look for a home

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of its own, and it acquired a small cottage further along South Street from the Carriers' Arms Hotel. The building was soon converted into a meeting place for the society. In addition to its regular syllabus of debates, lectures, etc., the society established a library of its own, and in two years 400 volumes of standard literature had been obtained, which were lent gratuitously to its members, who by this time numbered 70. In 1883 a Mutual Improvement Association's Union was formed in Ballarat. On Friday, 30th March of that year, this union conducted a contest which proved so successful that it aroused a desire in the members of the South Street Literary and Debating Society to do likewise on their own account. However, the time for action was to arrive later. The South Street Literary and Debating Society embarked on a building campaign, and in 1886 it erected a wooden hall to seat about 1,000 persons. It was situated in Skipton Street, near the original meeting place in South Street. It was equipped with a free library, reading and recreation rooms, and it proved to be a great acquisition to the society; and it was the means of creating greater interest in the activities of the society.

In June, 1891, a significant event took place. It was the holding of the first competitions by the society in its own hall. The competitions commenced on Tuesday, 16th June, and ended on 26th June. The total prize money distributed was 60 guineas, and about 250 competitors took part in literary, elocutionary and musical items. Literary subjects entered in the competition included such titles as: "The Most Urgent Social Reforms", "The Nobility of Labor", "Recreation", "The Economic Influence of the Scientific Discoveries of the Present Century", "The Best Means of Coping with the Liquor Traffic", "The British Empire". A debate was conducted on: "Should the Government Interfere with the Hours of Labour?" Prepared speeches were delivered on: "England — the Home of National Freedom" and "Deakin in Federation". Some of these problems are still unsolved. Impromptu speeches were a feature also, as well as a spelling bee. In the musical section many old and familiar songs received an airing, such as: "The Angel at the Window", "The Little Minstrel", "Ora Pro Nobis", "The Wonders of the Deep", and "On the Rolling Wave". Pianoforte and violin solos were also included. On the final night of the competition, 26th June, 1891, the prizes were distributed by the Governor of Victoria, Lord Hopetoun, who also pinned on each successful competitor a rosette of merit. A high tea and concert completed the evening's entertainment, and so the seed was sown at this first competition in June, 1891, which has now blossomed into the gigantic annual eisteddfod with which we are familiar today.

Many changes occurred as the years sped on towards the close of the nineteenth century and the Victorian era. In 1892 the entries for the annual competition doubled and a cooking contest for ladies only was introduced. Apparently this cooking contest was a successful addition, for in the next year this contest was confined to unmarried

ladies under 30 years of age. Probably unnumbered young swains suffered severely in cookery rehearsals; many doubts were cast as to whether every contestant was under 30 years of age — a difficult problem to solve. From 8th May, 1893, People's Concert, under the auspices of the society, was held in the Skipton Street hall every Monday evening and the proceeds were paid to the prize fund. These concerts continued for some months and were well patronized.

In those times the magic lantern was a popular feature at concerts and, coupled with highly sentimental songs, it produced a programme which would give the sophisticated audiences of today cause for merriment. One such programme for Monday, 11th September, 1893, was billed as a "Great English Night". The songs rendered were "The Englishman", "The Wreckers' Light", "Ora Pro Nobis", "Excelsior" and "The Village Blacksmith". Recitations were also given that night, entitled "Little Jim", "In the Signal Box" and "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight". The magic lantern slides illustrated the songs and recitations and they also gave glimpses of English scenes, train and shipwrecks, Ballarat statuary and how to kill crocodiles. More than likely the audience went home in tears and considered that they had had a really enjoyable evening. In 1894 came the first agitation for the amalgamation of the municipalities of Ballarat East and Ballarat West, and one of the essay subjects at the competition that year at South Street Literary and Debating Society was on the best practical scheme for the attainment of that end.¹ Even in 1894 taxation was a sore point, for one debate was on the question: "That taxation in Victoria pressed unjustly on the working class". In that year typewriting and shorthand competitions were held. When, in 1896, the entries for the annual competition came to over 800 the final concert was held in the Academy of Music in Ballarat, which is now known as Her Majesty's Theatre.

The first choral contests came in 1897. In 1898 the duration of the competitions was extended from 18th August to 8th September and three halls were needed — the South Street hall, the Academy of Music and the Mechanics' Institute. It was at this time that Miss Amy Castles, of Bendigo, made her debut at the competitions of the South Street Literary and Debating Society, and on that occasion she won the soprano and sacred solos. On 15th June, 1899, a successful complimentary concert was given in aid of Miss Castles in the Academy of Music, in Ballarat, and soon afterwards she went to Europe and became a famous singer.

The Alfred Hall was brought into use for the competitions in 1899, so great was the demand for seats for the various sessions. The first prize for the champion choral contest was increased to £100 that year, and it was won by the Ballarat Leidertafel under the baton

1 Ballarat East and Ballarat West were not united until 25th May, 1921.

of John Robson. A subject in the essay section was entitled: "Australian Manners and Characteristics". The winner was Mary Grant Bruce, who later was recognized as one of Australia's foremost writers.

The first year of the twentieth century brought the famous brass band contests, when the Lord Nelson Band, of St. Arnaud, won the selection contest and Prout's Band, of Ballarat, won the quickstep. A section for paintings was also introduced.

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In 1901 the winner of the champion debate was James Henry Scullin, who later became the Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia. This year also was memorable for the discovery of the world-famed bass singer Peter Dawson, who won the bass solo with "The Bandit Chief", by Christopher Mark. The adjudicator (Professor Petersen), said Dawson stood out conspicuously above the other competitors and he pronounced him an easy winner.

In 1902 the first adjudicator of music, Mr. James Ord Hume, was brought from England. He sailed from London in the R.M.S. *Arcadia* on 14th August, 1902, and arrived in Melbourne on 1st October, 1902. Mr. Hume was recognized as England's leading composer, arranger, band trainer and adjudicator. The genius and persistence of the secretary, W. D. Hill, was exemplified when Mr. Hume arrived at the Ballarat railway station. On being introduced to the secretary by the president, Mr. Hume said: "So you are the man, are you, who persistently annoyed me with telegrams". Later, at the opening night of the competitions, the president, Mr. F. J. Williams, said that the credit for bringing Mr. Hume from England was due mainly to one man — the secretary — who might be the personification of "South Street" as Kipling had written, with a little variation:

"Oh, 'e's little but he's wise,
'E's a terror for his size,
and don't 'e advertise!"

Entries for the 1902 competitions were received from 184 different places in Australia. The interstate places were: New South Wales 24, South Australia 13, Tasmania 3, Western Australia 2 and New Zealand 1. Sixteen bands competed: 1 from New South Wales, 2 from South Australia, 1 from Western Australia, 3 from Tasmania and 9 from Victoria. There were no grades in those days. The Newcastle City Band won both the selection and quickstep contests. Many other prominent adjudicators were brought from England in succeeding years, as you will later learn.

The running of special cheap excursion trains to Ballarat for the competitions was introduced in this year at the suggestion of the secretary of the society, and for many years afterwards this was quite

a source of revenue to the society. First class return tickets from Melbourne cost only 11/- and second class only 7/6. The society had to lodge with the Department of Railways a guarantee for each train, according to the mileage travelled, and it was issued with tickets at a certain price. A small loading fee was added to the price of tickets by the society and this fee was retained by it, plus a 10 per cent. rebate on the tickets sold at cost price, provided the amount of the guarantee was not diminished. Special trains from country centres were run in succeeding years to Ballarat for these annual competitions.

In 1903, Children's Day, which previously consisted mainly of juvenile choirs, was enlarged by the inclusion of gymnastic and calisthenic items. Now, in 1963 — sixty years later — the calisthenic section is the most popular contest in the competitions.

The Silver Jubilee of the South Street Literary and Debating Society was fittingly celebrated in 1904. The competitions were officially opened by the Prime Minister of Australia, the Right Hon. G. H. Reid, and the band contests were attended by the Governor-General and Lady Northcote. Both Her Majesty's Theatre and the Alfred Hall were by this time used for competitions, which sometimes ran simultaneously. Drags were chartered to take the choirs from the hall to the theatre and vice versa after they had competed, thus allowing both audiences to see and hear all the contestants.

In 1905 the second adjudicator was brought from England specially for the band contest. He was Mr. Albert Wade, who at one time conducted the famous Besses o' th' Barn Band, which was at that time the champion band of England. Mr. Wade remained in Australia and became the conductor of the City of Ballarat Band. Later he went to New Zealand to take over the Wanganui Garrison Band, and returned to the competitions of the South Street Literary and Debating Society in 1910 with this band. On that occasion he won the A Grade championship and also the quickstep contest. The competitions in that year were opened by the Hon. Thomas Bent, who was then Premier of Victoria.

The year 1906 I well remember, because it was in March of that year that I received the appointment of typist and stenographer in the office of the South Street Literary and Debating Society. I came straight from Coulthard's Business College and was capable of writing 120 words a minute of shorthand and was a more than average typist. I received the magnificent salary of five shillings a week. My home then was about 8 miles from Ballarat, which necessitated travelling by train to and fro each day at a cost of fifteen shillings a month. So I had a clear profit of five shillings per month, without taking into account meals and other expenses. However, I soon became interested in my work and found my employer, the great W. D. Hill, a most remarkable character. He was kind and considerate, and possessed

charm that could not be equalled. Although of small stature, he had big ideas and he embarked upon ventures that many would consider impossible. By this time the fame of the society's competitions had spread far and wide and the prize list was being added to. Competitors came from all the States of Australia and from New Zealand.

The Factory Choral Contest was introduced in 1907. It was an immediate success, and in following years it attracted choirs from factories in Melbourne and Geelong as well as from many in Ballarat. About the middle of 1907 Messrs. J. and N. Tait, the well-known theatrical and concert entrepreneurs, brought out the famous Besses o' th' Barn band from England for a tour of Australia and New Zealand. Advance bookings for their proposed visit to Ballarat was so poor that the Tait's decided to cancel the visit, but the indefatigable "Billy Hill", as he was then affectionately known, immediately persuaded his committee to guarantee Tait's £500 for the band to appear at Ballarat. They played in the Alfred Hall on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 11th, 12th and 13th September, 1907. Special trains were chartered from surrounding districts, and an intense advertising campaign was conducted, but all to no avail, as the receipts did not cover the guarantee. However, arrangements were made with the Tait's to bring the band to Ballarat on the first day of the band contest. It played at the city oval on Thursday, 24th October, 1907, in the afternoon and in the evening, and the society's deficit was recovered, plus some more.

Prior to the visit of the Besses, bands in Australia played standing in the formation of a circle with the bandmaster in the centre, but not so the Besses. They were formed up like an orchestra, all seated. Australian bands copied them and that formation has been used ever since.

The entries and audiences had now grown so remarkably that the committee of the society considered it necessary to have a hall of its own, capable of accommodating every section of the enlarged prize list. It was a bold step to take, as the society's resources consisted only of their own hall in Skipton Street, Ballarat. However, with commendable public spirit and courage a site was obtained early in 1908 on the corner of Little Bridge Street and Grenville Street South. An old-established livery stable stood on this site, and in order to acquire a sufficient area to build on it was necessary to cover portion of the Yarrowee Creek. Permission to undertake this work was obtained, debentures were issued to the extent of £2,500 and the project was got under way. The hall in Skipton Street was transported to the site on a huge jinker drawn by about a dozen horses and placed in Grenville Street facing west — the hall being renamed the Athenaeum, while the new hall, afterwards known as the Coliseum, was built facing north in Little Bridge Street and running for its full length over the creek. The construction was made

of wood and iron and it consisted of a ground floor with lower galleries on each side and at the back, and an upper back gallery and upper side galleries, the seating capacity being over 3,000. There were ample dressing rooms, an adequate stage and a large foyer. The contract for the building of the Coliseum was signed on 10th June, 1908, and the work commenced the next day. The building was completed in time for the opening of the annual competition on Monday, 28th September, at which Elgar's "Coronation Ode" was performed by the Ballarat Liedertafel's augmented choir, orchestra and military band of 400 performers. The supporting artists were Lilian Reed, soprano; Madame Gregor Wood, contralto; Gregor Wood, tenor; Horace Stevens, baritone; William Short (the King's trumpeter), and the musical director, Mr. George Herbert. The opening ceremony was performed by the Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon. Alfred Deakin.

In August, 1909, the society had the good fortune to be associated with J. and N. Tait in presenting two former competitors, Amy Castles and Peter Dawson, in the vocal section. By this time they had become world famous and they appeared in the Coliseum. It was a very memorable night and the society arranged for all of their season ticket holders to be admitted free to the concert. Naturally there was a packed house. The 1909 eisteddfod was opened by His Excellency the Governor of Victoria, Sir Thomas Gibson Carmichael, and the Prime Minister, the Hon. Alfred Deakin, was also present. The Governor-General, Lord Dudley, attended the band contest. The practice of bringing the musical adjudicator out from England was continued and Mr. Richard Stead, from Huddersfield, in Yorkshire, came that year.

In 1910 Mr. William Short was brought out again from England and the "Coronation Ode" was repeated on the opening night of the competitions, which were officially opened by the Prime Minister, the Hon. Andrew Fisher. This was the year the first band from New Zealand, the Wanganui Garrison, competed. It was conducted by the former English adjudicator Mr. Albert Wade, previously referred to, and it won the championship. Curiously enough, only last week a cutting from a recent New Zealand newspaper was handed to me by a former vocal competitor from New Zealand, now residing in Ballarat, in which was an article on the visit of the Wanganui Band to Ballarat in 1910. It stated that only three members of that band now remained — Steve Signal, 84 years; Jim McGrath and Bob Law, both 80 years. I am writing a letter to the band secretary and sending them each a copy of the special souvenir programme of the 1962 band contest, which records their victory in 1910.

It was in 1911 that Mr. Fred J. Williams, now a past president and former honorary treasurer of the society, visited England for the Coronation, and in the course of his visit there he was able to arrange

Press interviews. He successfully traced, at these interviews, the genesis, growth and development of the South Street Society. In two instances his interviews were published, with the titles: "How Australia finds her Melbas and Crossleys" and "The Story of the Greatest Musical Literary Festival of Modern Times". In one of his articles the following eulogy appeared from the Hon. Alfred Deakin:

"The society's very special claims to recognition are due to the educational value of its work, while the wide range of its competitions—practical, theoretical, literary, musical, artistic and dramatic—lift it quite out of the category of local institutions. The arts of peace, not forgetting the arts domestic, are being cultivated by the society systematically year by year. It has already acquired a distinctly national standing and is now aspiring to what may be termed an international status earned by its long and continuous successes. Such a society deserves every possible encouragement from overseas, as the recognised leader (by the many and various means which it has shaped to the needs of a young people of all classes and tastes) in progressive culture in Australia."

Other London newspapers published appreciative notices of the national eisteddfod of the South Street Literary and Debating Society of Ballarat, complimenting the society for its enterprise in engaging each year a musician of standing in England to adjudicate the musical section. The adjudicator for 1911 was Mr. Tom Morgan, of London, who had formerly been conductor of the band of the Coldstream Guards.

The year 1912 will be remembered for two outstanding incidents. The musical adjudicator was Mr. Alfred Gray, of Manchester. From time immemorial the judge of music for the band contest had to be enclosed in a tent so that he could not see the band perform. They were known to him by numbers only, and after each item was played he had to enter the points scored on a special card, enclose it in a sealed envelope and put it under the door of the tent, to be picked up by the manager of the contest, who deposited the envelope in a locked ballot box. At the conclusion of the contest the box was opened, the envelopes in it were opened and the points tabulated to find the winner. The card for each grade was a different colour. Unfortunately the A Grade card was of a reddish colour and one of the members of the committee of the South Street Literary and Debating Society was calling the numbers from the cards. All the results were obtained in readiness for their posting on the biograph screen at 10 o'clock that evening. The Governor-General, Lord Denman, and Lady Denman were present at the band concert that year. The A Grade contest resulted in the Rozelle (N.S.W.) Band being placed first with 188 points and the Geelong Municipal Band second with 186 points. The winners marched triumphantly back to their hotel and celebrated their victory in true bandsmen's style. The judge's remarks were always handed to the Press for publication in newspapers on Monday mornings, and at about 7.30 p.m. on Sunday night it was discovered by one of the linotype operators that the points allotted

the Rozelle Band on the judge's notes were 92, whereas the points scored from the card were taken as 95, which placed Rozelle first with a total of 188. A closer examination of the card showed that the figure was definitely 92 but could have been taken for 95. This meant that their total was reduced to 185 and Geelong, having scored 186, were really the winners. Mr. Hill was attending St. Andrew's Kirk, in Ballarat, at the time and he was sent for urgently and had to leave the service before its conclusion. Then the judge had to be found and he was asked to sign a Statutory Declaration that the correct figure was 92, and the awards came out in Monday morning's paper in their true form. Naturally there was consternation in the band world and a protest was lodged by the Rozelle Band. But after an exhaustive scrutiny of the judge's notes and the judge's card the protest was withdrawn and harmony was restored.

The other incident occurred in "Highland Day" at the conclusion of the afternoon session. Wizard Stone, the celebrated aeronaut, was to make an ascent in his monoplane from the oval, but he was unable to clear the wires and trees around the oval and crashed only seconds after he took off. Fortunately, although the monoplane was badly wrecked "Wizard" was unhurt. The 1913 competitions were opened by the Prime Minister, the Right Hon. Joseph Cook and proved just as successful as those in previous years. This year Mr. Edward Sutton was brought from Glasgow as chief musical adjudicator. Twenty-five competed, including eight from interstate and one from the Australian Navy — the band from H.M.A.S. *Encounter*. The climax to the competitions each year was the great open-air entertainment in the city oval in Ballarat, which was brilliantly illuminated for the occasion. Four platforms were erected at different points and these were all operating simultaneously by top-line vaudeville artists who moved from one platform to another. Bands would play intermittently and the evening's entertainment would terminate with a grand and spectacular display of fireworks.

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A huge list had been prepared for the competitions in 1914 and entries had just closed when World War I broke out, on 4th August, 1914. The committee decided, nevertheless, to carry on. Mr. Andrew Fisher, the Prime Minister, performed the opening ceremony on 28th September, 1914, and the prizes were distributed by the State Governor, Sir Arthur Stanley. Mr. J. W. Beswick was brought from England for the second time to judge the band contest that year. During the war years, 1915-1918, the competitions were staged on a reduced scale, but when victory came in November, 1918, South Street Literary and Debating Society reappeared in all its glory in 1919.

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I returned from the war in July, 1919, and soon afterwards resumed my connection with the society. Mr. Hill was still in the position of secretary and full of enthusiasm. He arranged with J. and N. Tait to bring the New South Wales State Orchestra of 80 performers, under the distinguished Belgian conductor Mr. Henri Verbrugghen, to Ballarat to open the 1919 competitions.

The magnificent concert provided by this famous orchestra at once captivated the huge audience and it restored the society to its pre-war status. The entries received were almost up to previous records and the standards in all sections were high. However, in 1920 the South Street Literary and Debating Society was back in earnest. The Federal Government made available the sum of £250 as prize money for a military band contest and *The Ballarat Courier* provided another £100 for an orchestral contest. All the other sections were framed at pre-war level and a senior cadet competition and a drum and bugle contest were also added.

The year 1921 was memorable on account of the appointment as musical adjudicator of Henri Verbrugghen, Director of the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music in Sydney. I would say he was the most popular adjudicator who ever graced the judge's chair at the South Street Society's competitions. He always had some anecdote to relate every time he went on to the stage to give his decision. His musical knowledge was such that the competitors were always eager to hear and read his criticisms. Altogether the 1921 competitions were most successful in every way, but, alas, before the end of the year Mr. Hill, the society's secretary, passed on. He was mourned by everyone, for a truly great life had ended. The South Street Literary and Debating competitions were, indeed, his monument. As I took over the position of general secretary I knew how hard I would have to work to maintain the society as the premier eisteddfod society in the Southern Hemisphere, but thanks to a very good committee over the years the South Street Society is still supreme.

For the next couple of years there was little alteration in the set-up; both were successful seasons, but in the 1924 competition an award was made for the first time which proved to be the most sought-after one in this country. It was *The Sun* Aria from grand opera. It started in a very modest way at the suggestion of the late Mr. Thorold Waters, music critic for *The Sun*, for prizes which amounted to 25 guineas. The first prize was 20 guineas. One hundred and five entries were received. It was a straight-out contest and it was won by Laurence Power, of Adelaide. From 1924 to 1933 the total prize money remained at 25 guineas, but in 1934 the prize money was increased to 230 guineas. Preliminary tests were held at South Street, in Ballarat, and the final took place in the Melbourne Town Hall. The winner of the final was Denis Dowling Ranfurly, of New

Zealand. In 1940 and 1941 the prize money awarded totalled 246 guineas. The competition was suspended from 1942 to 1944 because of World War II and it was resumed in 1945 with 384 guineas prize money; in 1946 and 1947 it totalled 434 guineas; in 1948 it totalled 500 guineas; from 1949 to 1956 it totalled 1,500 guineas; from 1957 to 1962 it totalled 2,000 guineas. The total prize money to last year awarded for the aria alone amounted to £29,065/4/- and entries from 1924 to 1962 numbered 3,734. Another 2,000 guineas has been provided for the year 1963. You will find all the previous winners in the society's guide book. Nine of the winners came from interstate or New Zealand and eighteen have since gone overseas.

In 1925 Messrs. Albert & Son, of Sydney, provided £43 for cash prizes and gold and silver medals for a Boomerang Mouth Organ Contest. Many thought such a contest was not in keeping with the standards of the South Street Literary and Debating Society, but the result was that 77 entries were received and the Coliseum in Ballarat was packed to the doors to hear the exponents of the mouth organ, who played some marvellous music. The winner was Percival Spouse, of Sydney, who was outstanding. The contests continued until 1931, when mouth organ bands came into existence, and contests for bands were held from 1931 to 1940. In 1926 a jazz band contest was included and met with a fair amount of success.

From 1908, when the Coliseum was built, until 1927, the committee was handicapped with a fairly large overdraft and was faced with an immediate expenditure of £2,500 on the sewerage of the two halls (Athenaeum and Coliseum). It was decided, therefore, in 1927 to launch an appeal for £7,500. This appeal was headed by a gift of £100 from Dame Nellie Melba, who also offered to give a concert in the Coliseum to help the appeal. These were her words, which were circulated throughout Australia:

"Its work is national in character and scope; its acknowledged achievements will stand for generations; the possibilities of its increasing usefulness and value are almost unlimited, therefore. SOUTH STREET MUST GO ON! I am delighted to associate myself with an effort to free from debt the South Street Society — the creator and administrator of Australia's great eisteddfod. Citizens of Ballarat, of Victoria, yes, of Australia surely will see that this effort is completely successful. All the arts and accomplishments that give grace, beauty and dignity of life in Australia have been greatly served by this society, which for nearly 50 years has laboured assiduously to promote their study and development, and to inspire their votaries to meritorious excellence. Successful South Street competitors are amongst the most gifted of Australians. The work of the society is carried on by purely honorary committeemen, with one salaried officer, the secretary. The public in value get back fifty-fold every sovereign they put into it. Today the institution needs special and considerable financial aid — HELP IT! Please, please remember — he gives twice who gives quickly."²

² See *The Argus*, 3rd June, 1927, p. 19

The sum of £750 was raised from this Melba concert on 26th July, 1927, and the total amount of the appeal reached £2,325.

In 1928 the Australian Travel Service Pty. Ltd. promoted a Commonwealth-wide contest for a singer to travel free to Wales with the Welsh delegation in 1929, and with an additional £50 in cash to compete in the Welsh eisteddfod. The Victorian section of the contest was conducted by the South Street Society in Ballarat. The winner was Eric Jones, of Northcote, in Victoria. Each State winner had to appear in a final in Melbourne at the Melbourne Town Hall and the outright winner was Miss Irene Stancliffe, of Western Australia.

The society celebrated its Jubilee on 10th July, 1929, by a magnificent concert — the artists comprising former champions of its competitions. Elsie Fraser (piano), August de Gilco (violin), Edith Warburton (soprano), Eileen Pascoe Webbe (contralto), George Lemke (baritone), Edward Hocking (tenor), Louie Dunn (elocutionist), W. L. Paine (elocutionist) and Ballarat Male Harmonists. It was a memorable night. The 1929 competitions attracted enormous entries and a very successful year was realised.

For the years 1930 to 1935 the prize lists showed little variation and each year brought along a crop of new competitors in the various sections. As usual, early in the year preparations had begun for the 1936 eisteddfod, but at 10.15 a.m. on Tuesday, 24th March, the society received what other organisations might have considered a "knock-out blow", when the huge Coliseum in Ballarat, the society's home for 27 years, was totally destroyed by fire. The flames swept from end to end in seven minutes, and in an amazingly short space of time the whole structure was burned to the ground. The Athenaeum, which was the original hall of the South Street Society, was badly damaged. The whole of the back, including the stage, was burnt out; most of the roof was destroyed and only the skeleton was left. Fortunately the society's office, which was of brick on the corner of Grenville and Little Bridge Streets, was undamaged and all the records were intact. However, quite a number of historical relics were in the Coliseum, including three large framed groups of successful competitors. Each year Richards & Co. (the official photographers to the society) prepared a framed group of the successful competitors which was presented to the president as a memento of his year of office. These groups were approximately 8 feet x 6 feet and were hung on the walls of the foyer. Of course all the stage furnishings, electrical and other necessary equipment for the conduct of the competitions were lost with this fire. A prophecy was fulfilled when, in 1908, the ceremony of declaring the newly built Coliseum officially opened was performed, the late Cr. Richard Pearse, who was not, as he said, a prophet or the son of a prophet, ventured nevertheless into the realms of prediction. In his usual vigorous style he roundly condemned the erection of the building across the Yarrowee, and stated bluntly that

that day would come when the Coliseum would "go down the creek". The Coliseum has gone down into the creek — or as much of its ruins as could get there — but Cr. Pearce was, in 1908, talking in terms of water rather than of fire. He staged a graphic picture of a huge flood which would carry the Coliseum like another Noah's Ark on the bosom of the waters and, there being no Mount Ararat within reasonable distance, it would be stranded behind the woollen mills. The big building did not meet with such a fate, but, though Cr. Pearce's prediction did not literally come true, the Coliseum has certainly gone down the creek.

However, with commendable courage the committee of the South Street Society met early and decided to "carry on". It was then discovered what a host of friends and well-wishers the society had. The Melbourne newspaper *The Sun* headed a "Carry On Fund" with a donation of £200, and soon strong financial assistance was coming from many sources.

Sufficient money was raised to enable the old Alfred Hall in Ballarat to be reconditioned and made to comply with public health regulations in time for the 1936 competitions to be held. The last time they had been held in the Alfred Hall was in 1907 and so history repeated itself. The Alfred Hall was used continuously from 1936 until 1956, when the Civic Hall, which had been built by the City Council, was opened and the South Street Society's competitions were conducted there from that year.

From 1937 to 1941 there were memorable years of contests in the Alfred Hall. In 1938 there was a "Back to South Street Vocal Contest", which was open to all former South Street competitors. Evidently many of those who competed in earlier years were not enthusiastic or afraid to match up to the singers of recent years, for only a moderate number of entries was received. The contest was won by Alfredo Luizzi, who won *The Sun* Aria in the same year. The Diamond Jubilee of the society was celebrated in 1939. A very attractive prize list was prepared to mark the occasion, and from then each year's programme up to 1941 was conducted very much on similar lines.

The committee decided to suspend the competitions in 1942 — the first break in 51 years — owing to the Second World War, and they were not resumed until 1945.

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An ambitious prize list was prepared for the 1945 competition on lines similar to those of 1941. The committee decided that the total net proceeds of the competition in 1945 would be donated to the Ballarat Patriotic Fund. Although three years had elapsed since the previous competition, the entries exceeded 3,000, and they constituted a record up to that time. The vocal entries totalled 1,480.

This was a record that has not since been surpassed. The net profit in 1945 amounted to £1,082/1/-, and this was also a record. This sum was handed over to the council of the Ballarat Patriotic Fund. The entries for the competition in 1946 totalled 3,755, and that year was notable for the fact that the beautiful ebony Bluthner concert grand piano, obtained as a result of a hard-working committee's efforts to raise sufficient money to purchase it, was used for the first time for the competitions. Early in 1943, when Miss Elsie Morison, of Ballarat, won the Melba Scholarship, a committee was formed to arrange a complimentary concert to aid Miss Morison in her future studies. This was held on Easter Saturday night, and with the addition of many donations a considerable sum was obtained. While Miss Morison continued her studies in Melbourne an annual amount was made available to her, and the balance was given to her when she left for overseas.

Instead of disbanding, it was decided that the committee should continue to function and raise funds for the purchase of a grand piano for the South Street Literary and Debating Society, in Ballarat. Up to this time a grand piano had to be brought from Melbourne when required, and the South Street Society had to do the same thing. So in 1947 the opportunity arrived to purchase a piano, to be handed over to the South Street Literary and Debating Society.

In 1947 another important feature arrived. *The Ballarat Courier* and radio station 3BA provided a sum of 106 guineas for a popular ballad contest, which had an immediate success. Ninety entries were received and the event was won by Miss Norma Honeychurch, of Bendigo. The contest was keenly followed by the public and it attracted large audiences. This contest has been continued annually since 1947 and last year the prize money was increased to £174. In the sixteen years of its existence 1,620 entries have been received and total prize money donated amounted to £1,843/10/-.

In 1948 the Suttons Star for Opera quest was introduced for prizes totalling 50 guineas, which were donated by Suttons' music warehouse. This quest was open only to those from 18 to 23 years of age and was designed to assist young singers who desired to study for an operatic career. This, too, proved of great assistance in preparing aspirants for the bigger event, *The Sun Aria*. Other sections of the competitions were, as usual, well filled and the season was most successful.

The year 1949 was a replica of 1948, except that the entries for the first time exceeded 4,000, and so the competitions for the next six years were merrily on their way, following the pattern of the preceding year.

In 1950 friends and admirers of the late Miss Louie Dunn, who lost her life in a street accident in Ballarat that year, arranged for a memorial prize to perpetuate the name of Louie Dunn. The

six competitors in the speech section who gained the highest points in the Shakespearian recital, the lyrical recital and the champion were to appear in a final for the Louie Dunn Prize of twelve guineas. A special fund was created, and from this fund the annual prize is provided. Louie Dunn was an outstanding competitor, teacher, producer and adjudicator. She won the South Street Society's aggregate in 1941. In 1951 the South Street Society celebrated its Diamond Jubilee of Competitions, and of course another excellent number of entries were received, and high standards were maintained in all sections.

In 1952 the committee decided to instal Tierstack multiple seating units in the Alfred Hall in Ballarat. The seats were automatic tip-up type and were a vast improvement on the seating they replaced. On 10th February, 1953, a determined attempt was made to burn down the Alfred Hall, where the competitions were now held. A milkman noticed the fire at the north side of the hall at 2 a.m. that morning and immediately notified the Fire Brigade. It was soon on the scene and managed to save the hall from destruction. If this had occurred, the South Street Society would have had no home for the second time. However, a new hall was soon to be a reality. The City Council was ready to commence clearing the site of the old haymarket on which to erect a modern Civic Hall. But it was not until 1956 that the structure was completed. The Brisbane Eisteddfod Juvenile Choir made its first appearance this year and won the juvenile choral contest. No new features were included in the 1954 prize list, but again there was a remarkably good entry and everything passed off successfully.

The year 1955 was notable because it was the last year the Alfred Hall in Ballarat would be used, and another attempt was made to burn down the hall on 26th May, 1955, in the same area as two previous attempts had been made, but fortunately another "save" was effected.

Early that year our official accompanist, Miss Ellinor Morcom, left on a tour of Europe. She met and heard Miss Elsie Morison in London and predicted a great future for her. She advised the society that Miss Morison expected to make an Australian tour in about two years' time. Miss Morcom also met some previous winners of *The Sun* Aria, who all seemed to be making good. The juvenile choral contest was again won by the Brisbane Eisteddfod Juvenile Choir, for the second time.

All sections were well filled and the curtain was rung down on the Alfred Hall stage for the last time on Saturday evening, 29th October, 1955, with the A Grade band own selection contest. It may be of interest to learn that the Alfred Hall was built in Ballarat in six weeks in 1867 to welcome Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, and also built over the Yarrowee Creek. It was used for many purposes (and notably the Mayoral Ball) which were features of the

social life of Ballarat in the 1870's. But perhaps the most remarkable event ever held there was the Six-days-go-as-you-please Contest, which consisted of walking or running or going as you please around the hall for six days — the competitor who covered the greatest distance being the winner. The roped track was eighteen laps to the mile. Two bands played during the day and evening and large crowds attended to watch the go-as-you-pleasers in various states of collapse as the days went on. The champion walker of the world, W. Edwards, entered and was favourite. He was leader for most of the time, but in the concluding stages of the week was passed by a local walker named Baker. They had the finish to themselves, Baker winning with 414 miles and 10 laps; Edwards covered 410 miles. The promoters stated before the contest began that if no contestant covered 500 miles the prizes would be withheld. However, it was agreed to give the prizes because of the extreme coldness of the weather and the damp arising from the creek beneath had caused some of the contestants to suffer from rheumatics. The advertisement announced that Edwards, the champion walker of the world, would appear in a chaste and appropriate attire and the gallery would be reserved for ladies.

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A new era began in 1956 when the new Civic Hall in Ballarat was used for the first time. The total prize money amounted to £6,200, including £2,450 for the Australian Brass Band Championships, which are only staged in Victoria every six years. The eminent brass band adjudicator Harry Mortimer was specially engaged from London for the band contest. A total of 3,754 entries was received for the whole of the competitions. The opening night was Thursday, 6th September, and a special programme was presented by Miss Nancy Weir (pianist), Mr. Graham Wood (violinist), Miss Verona Cappadona (vocalist), *Sun Aria* winner 1953.

It took some time to settle down in the new surroundings, but before the conclusion of the series favourable comments were forthcoming from all sides regarding the appearance, acoustics and general set-up of the new Civic Hall. The competitions are now held annually in this hall, with the society's office near the front corner of the building.

In 1957 Miss Elsie Morison, who had come to Australia to sing with the Elizabethan Trust Opera Company, graciously offered to give a concert in the Civic Hall, Ballarat. The proceeds were to be shared with the South Street Society and the Ballarat Orphanage. The concert was held on 11th November, 1957, the financial result being £1,306/18/4. The society's share of £653/9/2 was supplemented by the society to form a capital sum of £1,000, which provides the Elsie Morison Prize at the South Street Society and is open to the three

placed performers in the champion vocal solo for each sex. Each competitor sings a selection from oratorio and an art song by a modern composer. Winners of this prize so far are:

- 1958 David Gray, Sydney, N.S.W.
- 1959 Donald Solomon, East Malvern, Victoria.
- 1960 Lynette Carey, Ocean Grove, Victoria.
- 1961 Geoffrey Hartnett, Earlwood, N.S.W., and
Patricia Connop, Hawthorn, Victoria.
- 1962 Max Serpell, Camberwell, Victoria.

The competitions in the years 1959, 1960 and 1961 provided the usual varied programmes. New items were introduced in the competition of 1961, namely modern opera quest and a television talent contest.

The competition in 1962 saw the society's greatest achievement when Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II conferred the title "Royal" on the society, which is now known as Royal South Street Society, and the eisteddfod as the Royal South Street Competitions.

A new section for recorder bands was included in 1962. These bands are being formed in State schools, and it is hoped that such a contest will improve the standard of their playing.

For this year's competitions prize lists have been issued and circulated all over Australia and the committee is hoping for another big entry. Entries close on Monday, 22nd July, 1963, and after their classification comes the task of arranging the timetable. The competitions will extend from Saturday, 7th September, 1963, until Saturday, 26th October, 1963.