

Essie Jenyns and her Australian terriers

The acclaimed Australian-born Shakespearian actress Essie Jenyns (1864–1920) gave up the stage for marriage, charity work and to promote the breeding of Australian terriers.



JOHN HAWKINS

Elizabeth Esther Helen Jennings, or Essie, was born in Brisbane on 5 October 1864, the second child of Charles Jennings, chemist, and his wife Emily, née Morse (Moss). Her father died in 1871 and in 1877 her mother went on the stage as Kate Arden, marrying the actor William James Holloway, her manager. Young Elizabeth soon joined her mother and step-father on the stage; as Essie Jenyns, she had her first speaking role in 1879 at the Theatre Royal, Hobart.¹

In 1884, Essie visited Europe with her mother and Holloway. She saw the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt on stage, watched the foremost French directors instruct students at the Paris Conservatoire, and in London saw the actress Mary Anderson, in whose roles she was to excel.

With his own Shakespeare Company, Holloway opened in Sydney in September 1886, claiming that Essie, who had not acted overseas, had been 'pronounced by eminent critics to be the foremost actress in Australia.'

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Essie Jenyns as Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*. The State Library of NSW now holds the Jenyns second folio Shakespeare of 1632 presented by four admirers in Hobart in 1887, one of whom was John Robert Wood, later to become her husband. Image courtesy State Library of Victoria

Imogen was launched in August 1890 from Fleming & Ferguson's yard on the River Clyde. She was originally commissioned by Mr. J R Wood of Newcastle as a wedding present for his bride Miss Essie Jenyns



She was praised for her 'pleasing' performance and voice in the melodrama; overnight she became the star Holloway had advertised.

During her first Sydney season, an enraptured reviewer wrote

...we have no English-speaking actress equal in potentialities to Miss Essie Jenyns. Her greatest danger will be in the indiscriminate applause which will be given to her.²

After 14 weeks at the New Opera House and then 16 at the Criterion Theatre in Sydney, she played for 20 weeks at the major theatres in Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart and Brisbane, excelling in such leading roles as Juliet, Rosalind and Portia (**plate 1**). Just weeks after she opened as Juliet, her portrait appeared in the press.³

One reviewer observed that audiences were so mesmerised by her great beauty and fascination that they were unable to judge her acting. Although she showed little original interpretation, smitten admirers claimed that she had 'infinitely more soul' than any contemporary actress – and she was a native-born Australian.

Between 1886 and 1888, Essie made 480 appearances, but in May 1888 the star announced her farewell season. Her last performance was on 29 June.⁴

At the height of her success, on 5 December 1888 Essie married John Robert Wood (1865-1928), a prominent cricketer and the son of a wealthy Newcastle brewer. A right hand bat and medium pace bowler, Wood played two matches for NSW, with a highest score of 81 and best bowling of 3-65.⁵

Holloway had had plans for Essie to try her luck in London, but she saw marriage as an excuse to retire from the stage. Her early retirement into respectable and wealthy domesticity made her the heroine of women's magazines.

News of the hugely popular wedding was telegraphed from Sydney and reported with minor variations in newspapers all over Australia:

Miss Essie Jenyns, the popular actress, was married to Mr. John R. Wood of Newcastle, at St. Andrew's Cathedral to-day. The event excited great interest and the press of the general public in the cathedral was so great that the marriage party had difficulty in making their way through the building. The crushing and rushing of the crowd inside and outside of the building brought about many disgraceful scenes. Some ladies and children received very rough treatment, many, including the bride, being reduced to a fainting condition. The Cathedral fittings were seriously damaged, seats, railings, and gas standards being broken down, curtains torn, carved woodwork chipped and broken, and all the handsome floral decorations destroyed.⁶

The couple spent their honeymoon in Europe, in part on the yacht *Imogen* (**plate 2**), which was commissioned by Essie's husband John Wood as her wedding present and launched in August 1890 from Fleming & Ferguson's yard on the Clyde. After a three-year voyage around the Mediterranean,⁷ the vessel was sold in 1893 and Mr and Mrs Wood returned to their magnificent home, Jesmond House, in Newcastle (**plate 3**).



3 Jesmond House, built in the 1870s and once regarded as Newcastle's most fashionable house, with its landmark tower attributed to architect James Henderson. Local brewer and owner John Wood extended and remodelled it. Following Wood's death in 1888, the house was occupied by his son J.R. Wood and wife Essie Jenyns. Plays were occasionally performed in the gardens. After the Woods left for Edinburgh in 1907, Jesmond House was sold in 1928 and converted into flats. Image courtesy University of Newcastle

Essie developed other interests, including charity work and dogs. Her aim was to breed the perfect Australian Terrier, so to encourage Australasian breeders she designed and presented a silver trophy cup (plates 4 & 5) to the Kennel Club of NSW in 1906, to be presented to the best Australian terrier in their annual show, to be held for a year subject to suitable security, until it was won for a third time. Names of the winners were to be inscribed on the cup.⁸

The cup was first awarded at the Kennel Club show in November 1906:

The Woodstock challenge trophy presented by Mrs J. R. Wood of Newcastle, for Australian terriers was also on view. It is a cup, massively made of solid Australian silver, adorned with a gem obtained from each of the States and New Zealand, and, it will be interesting for advocates of local production to know, is the work of Australian silversmiths. Under the circumstances the cup for the first time was appropriately won by a dog called Australian Colours.⁹

The cup is illustrated in *The Illustrated Kennel News* of December 1907 with two pages of text regarding Mrs Wood's Australian Terriers (plate 6). One page is devoted to pictures, the other to letter-press on terriers. Photographs include Mrs Wood with her terriers Woodstock Duke and Doongarah Wahn on the eve of their departure by ship from Sydney in 1907 and the £30 trophy she presented to the Kennel Club of NSW for the best Australian terrier exhibited at its shows.¹⁰

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reports¹¹

The editor of our English contemporary is eulogistic of the little terriers "made in Australia." He says: "they fill the want of a small active, game little dog that can stand a hot Australian summer ... The little fellows are certain at no distant time to take a very firm hold of the English doggy world."

Woodstock Duke and Doongarah Wahn, backed by a brewing fortune from Newcastle NSW, took the Australian terrier to the world in 1907 when the family left for Scotland. Essie, on the leisurely trip with her husband to Britain via Asia, reported that she had sent eleven of her dogs to London on the *Salamis*, including 'seven rough-coated Australian terriers'. These were placed in quarantine for three months, and, she wrote,

It will be a test during the coming winter to see if the seven little Australians and the others can stand the extreme change.¹²

By 1908, the Woods were living on a 350-acre property, 'Collington', at Bexhill on Sea where she found that the dogs were 'excellent sporting terriers',¹³ with a city residence at Putney Hill, London. She fitted in well with the English country life, even appearing with her dogs in *Country Life*.¹⁴

On a later visit to Australia, Essie died suddenly at Killara, Sydney, on 6 August 1920 and was buried by an Anglican minister in the Presbyterian section of the Sandgate Cemetery at Newcastle. She was survived by her husband, son John and daughter Lyal. Her estate was valued at £1,697. She left her presentation copy of what was then considered the first folio of Shakespeare (1623) to the Art Gallery of NSW as a gesture to the people of Sydney 'for their loyalty to me'.¹⁵ In 1922 her remains were disinterred, cremated and buried in Waverley cemetery.

Notes

- 1 Helen M van Der Poorten, 'Jennings, Elizabeth Esther Helen (1864–1920)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/jennings-elizabeth-esther-helen-3855/text6129>, accessed 29 Sept 2011
- 2 *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 Oct 1886 p 15
- 3 *Australian Town & Country Journal* 23 October 1886 p 19
- 4 *SMH* 26 May 1888 p 12; 27 June 1888 p 18
- 5 <http://www.espnricinfo.com/australia/content/player/8252>, accessed 6 October 2011.
- 6 E.g. *Argus* 6 Dec 1888 p 7; *SA Register* 6 Dec 1888

p 5; *Brisbane Courier* 6 Dec 1888 p 5; *Launceston Examiner* 8 Dec 1888 p 3. For fuller descriptions see *SMH* 6 Dec 1888 p 8 & 9.

- 7 Essie Wood, *Yachting Ways and Yachting Days*, London 1892
- 8 *SMH* 12 Sept 1906 p 4
- 9 *SMH* 19 Nov 1906 p 6
- 10 *SMH* 5 Feb 1908 p 6
- 11 *Ibid*
- 12 *SMH* 10 July 1907 p 6. Ethel Turner's novel *Seven Little Australians* had been published in 1894.
- 13 *Queenslander* 19 Dec 1908 p 29
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Since transferred to the State Library of NSW, it is now regarded as a 1632 edition.
- 16 St Paul's letter to the Corinthians, *Corinthians* Ch 9 v 24, as altered by John Bunyan (1628–88) in his sermon *The Heavenly Footman*.
- 17 R. Maguire, 'Italian jewellers in NSW' *Australiana* vol 26 no 3, August 2004, p 10-12
- 18 *Tasmanian Mail*, 26 Dec 1908. p 22



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A possibly unique Australian silver, gem set, enamelled art nouveau presentation cup, in its original oval, silver-mounted cedar case. The difficult-to-make enamelled inscription reads 'So strive that ye May Obtain'¹⁶ with a separate detachable shield 'Woodstock Challenge Cup'. The base is set with opals (NSW), the stem and the handles with greenstone (New Zealand), Gaspiete (WA) and Rock Crystal (SA); the stones from Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland have so far not been identified. The cup was made by John Priora¹⁷ (d. 1938) and retailed by Prouds Ltd, 1906. Image from J B Hawkins Photograph Library

5A

Woodstock Challenge Cup, 'Proud' mark top of right handle, 1906

5B

Woodstock Challenge Cup, mark to base of 'PB' for Priora Brothers, maker John Priora, 1906

5C

Woodstock Challenge Cup, W J Proud Sydney marks to the front clasp of the oval cedar case, 1906

5D

Woodstock Challenge Cup, 'Sterling Silver' mark top of left handle, 1906



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Essie Jenyns's terriers. In forwarding the accompanying photographs Mrs Wood (née Essie Jenyns) writes: 'I am sending you these photographs of my Australian terriers, the dog I have so successfully introduced to England and which has been so much admired, in the hope it may interest my old friends in Tasmania. When shown at the Crystal Palace (the Kennel Club) last month, they were spoken of in several papers as the brightest spot in the show. That among 3,000 dogs was great praise. Mr. Milburn, shipowner, of Victoria, was the only other exhibitor under this class. At the coming Ladies' Kennel Club Show in London I am showing ten dogs under the class for Australian rough-coated terriers.'¹⁸

