

Chapter Six

Our Foes in the North

Extract for Educational Purposes Only

British Music Hall : An Illustrated History by Richard Anthony Baker 2005

Anti-music hall hysteria reached Scotland in 1875. Glaswegian dignitaries were dismayed at the moral effects of some of the city's free-and-easies. At a meeting at the Religious Institution Rooms, evidence was given that:

Young women, so scantily clad as to be almost naked, danced upon stages before crowds of men, sitting drinking beer and spirits and smoking cigars and pipes; whilst men sang songs both blasphemous and filthy, containing, as they did, suggestions of a coarse and indecent nature¹.

The head of Cunard, John Burns, who called the meeting, said that:

A vast number of the young men of our city have been in the habit of visiting these saloons, where every evil influence is at work to break down their self-respect and ruin them morally and physically; and upon this point we can speak with precision, because we have the direct evidence of fathers and mothers and heads of establishments and the police themselves to prove that more young men have gone wrong by the instrumentality of singing saloons than from any other cause in the city².

William Mitchell, of the local School Board, spoke of one cheap theatre, where most of the audience were children under 13:

Here, poor, ragged, barefooted boys and girls of the lowest and most neglected class, using the most filthy language and pulling one another about in the roughest possible way, nightly congregate at the charge of 1d [about 0.5P] ... During some part or other of the evening, songs are sung and words are spoken and dances are danced which are either wholly or partially immoral and indecent³.

The Lord Provost, local magistrates and the police promised to investigate the allegations, but nothing was done:

No prosecution is likely, though spoken of. There is really nothing wrong. It is all moonshine⁴.

By 1892, all free-and-easies had disappeared from Glasgow.

The city has a fascinating music hall history. The Britannia, situated on the first floor of a four-storey building in Trongate, is the major surviving music hall building in Scotland, its famous stage, stalls and gallery still virtually intact. It started out as Campbell's music hall in 1857, but had become the Britannia by 1906, when it was bought by an eccentric millionaire, Albert Pickard. Having arrived from Bradford two years previously, he set about buying flats, offices and shops until he became the second biggest landlord in the

west of Scotland. It was Pickard who re-named the Britannia the Panopticon, retaining it as a music hall, but adding waxworks, sideshows, amusement arcades and a freak show.

In the music hall, amateurs were allowed to try their luck on Friday nights as the manager stood in the wings with a long hooked pole to pull them offstage should they fail. The debonair song-and-dance man, Jack Buchanan, was one who, when young, suffered this ordeal. Between 1923 and 1927, the hall operated as the Tron cinema and then became the Panopticon again until it closed in 1938. A trust, set up to restore the Britannia, is spending £4.5 million on converting it into a working museum, a monument to the entertainment and social history of Britain. It is hoped that the ground floor will be converted to a Victorian-style pub.

The Glasgow Empire, which opened as the Gaiety in 1874, was one of the best known music halls in Britain. Standing on the corner of West Nile Street, it was originally the Choral Hall, a small theatre specialising in Shakespearean and musical plays. However, within three years, music hall was introduced. Among those who appeared at the Gaiety were Marie Lloyd; the coster comedian, Gus Elen; and the last of the lions comiques, George Lashwood. It was such a success that on Burns Night, 1896, it closed to allow Frank Matcham to undertake an opulent conversion at a cost of £30,000. In April 1897, it reopened with Vesta Tilley topping the bill. Another major reconstruction was carried out in 1930, increasing the theatre's capacity to 2,100.

Audiences at the Glasgow Empire had a reputation for being tough on English entertainers. The top variety comedian, Max Miller, was once asked whether he had ever appeared there. No, Miller replied: I'm a comic, not a missionary. The singer, Des O'Connor, fainted on stage before he had even started his act. The comedian, Eric Morecambe, used to add that, when O'Connor came round and started to sing, the audience fainted. Another comic, Jimmy Wheeler, said he was put off by being watched by "rows of dour Scots munching thistles". Mike and Bernie Winters fared no better. Mike began the act by doing three minutes on his own. When Bernie joined him, someone in the audience shouted out: Fucking hell. There's two of them.

The Glasgow Empire was pulled down in 1963 to make way for an office block.

The two most accomplished exponents of Scottish music hall were Will Fyffe and Harry Lauder. Fyffe was the son of a ship's carpenter, whose love of amateur theatricals



Will Fyffe as one of his many characters. (Richard Anthony Baker)

ERRORS; The author names Will's first wife correctly as Lily Bolton when in fact she was Lily Wilcock daughter of Helen Bolton and George Wilcock and also has failed to note that the date of the loss of the SS Rowan was early morning on Sunday 9th October, 1921 and NOT the 13th.

made him give up his job and establish a theatre company. From the age of seven, Will was required to play an astonishingly wide range of parts, including Little Willie in the melodrama, *East Lynne*; Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and, later on, Polonius in *Hamlet*.

His salary was 4s 11d [just under 25P] a week plus a penny for painting the scenery. In later years, he was to earn £600 a week.

While touring in revue, Fyffe wrote two songs, hoping to sell them to Harry Lauder, but Lauder rejected both. So, at the Pavilion Theatre, Glasgow, one night in 1921, Will tried them out himself: *I Belong to Glasgow* and *I'm Ninety-Four Today*, the first portraying a drunken Clydeside workman Will had seen at Glasgow's Central Station one Saturday night. As the man fumbled in his pocket for his ticket, the crowd in the queue behind him became increasingly irritated. Eventually, an exasperated ticket inspector asked him: 'Well, where do you come from? Do you belong to Glasgow?' The reply: 'No, my good man. I do not. Right at this moment, Glasgow belongs to me.' Will liked the line and, within a short time, he had completed both the lyric and the melody of what was to become his best known song:

I belong to Glasgow, dear old Glasgow town.
But what's the matter with Glasgow for it's going round and round?
I'm only a common old working chap
As anyone can see,
But, when I get a couple of drinks on a Saturday,
Glasgow belongs to me.

Fyffe interrupted the song with patter:

Why should all these blooming millionaires have all the money? ... Their money's tainted. Tain't yours, tain't mine ... They condemn a poor British working man because they see him staggering down the road drunk ... What about these people in their blooming motor cars? They go past so quick, you don't know whether they're drunk or sober.

Fyffe, a short plump man with a long nose and twinkling eyes, made his London debut in 1916 and achieved star status when he appeared at the London Palladium in 1921, the first of sixteen appearances he was to make there. At the 1937 Royal Variety Show at the Palladium, he was the highlight of the evening. When he sang *Wi' A Hundred Pipers an' a'*, a standing ovation greeted one hundred pipers of the Greys, the Camerons and the Scots Fusiliers as they marched down the aisles and onto the stage. Afterwards, Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, declared Will her favourite comedian.

WILL FYFFE [William Fyffe]

Born Dundee 16 February 1885

Married [1] Lily Bolton [Died when the steamer, S.S. Rowan, sank en route from Glasgow to Dublin 13 October 1921] Two daughters, Josie and Winnie [2] **Emmeline Eugenie Pooley** in Southwark, south London, 18 November 1922 [Died 1979] One son, William, born Thanet, Kent, 19 September 1927 [married Michelle Franks August 1950] [Died 18 December 2008] Daughters, including Eileen [married Peter Morgan-Fletcher, Edinburgh, 9 February 1941]

Died St. Andrews, Fife, 14 December 1947

James Agate seemed to prefer him to Lauder:

The world now holds a new and unspoiled joy. This is the Scotchman as he really is, not belaudered to the sentimental skies ... I here and now salute a great artist and comic genius¹.

Will Fyffe had established himself in movies by the Second World War and returned to Britain shortly before its outbreak. Hollywood tried to lure him back with offers of a long-term contract, reportedly worth £50,000 a picture, but he was adamant that he would not leave Britain in time of war. He made up for that by appearing at the Palace Theater in New York in April 1927; February and March 1928; January 1929; and he was in the last edition of Earl Carroll's *Vanities* in 1932.

Fyffe stayed at the top of the bill until 1947, when, while convalescing after an ear operation at a hotel he owned in St Andrews, Fife, he suffered a dizzy turn and fell from a window onto a wooden ramp twenty feet below, suffering fatal injuries.

Around the world, Harry Lauder promoted the image of the archetypal Scot as a man of simple pleasures, loving his wife, his hearth, his pipe and his whisky. The son of a potter who made jam jars and lemonade bottles, he was the eldest child in a hard-working, God-fearing family of eight [five boys and three girls]; money was always in short supply. So, Lauder started work while still a young boy, at one time helping a local farmer feed his pigs, at another, assisting a market gardener by picking his strawberries.

After Lauder's father died at the age of 31, the family moved to Arbroath, where Lauder was engaged as a "half-timer" at a flax works, putting in twelve hours' work every Monday, Wednesday and Friday and attending school on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. At about this time, he joined the tectotal group, the Band of Hope, and at one meeting was persuaded to sing: his choice of material, *I'm a Gentleman Still*. He liked the experience and quickly became engrossed in concert-hall entertainment. Not long after, a group of travellers visited Arbroath, presenting a show, part of which was a competition for amateurs. Lauder beat twelve others to win the top prize, a gold watch. Within six weeks, he entered another competition and again came top.

When he was 14, the family moved inland to Hamilton, a coal-mining town in Lanarkshire, where he was employed first as a trapper, opening and closing the gates that controlled air currents to the pits and then as a pony driver. Down the mine, he gained a reputation as a singer and appeared at another Band of Hope concert in the Hamilton district, again singing *I'm a Gentleman Still*.

By this time, Lauder had added some patter to his act and, after appearing in another competition concert run by one of his fellow miners, he decided to give up work in

HARRY LAUDER [Henry MacLennan Lauder]
Born Portobello, near Edinburgh, 4 August 1870
Married Ann Vallance 19 June 1891 [Died 31 July 1927] One son, John, born 19 November 1891 [Died on active service 28 December 1916]
Died Strathaven, Lanarkshire, 26 February 1950



Harry Lauder, Laird of the Halls. (Richard Anthony Baker)

the pits and become a professional singer. In 1894, he made his professional debut in the Lanarkshire village of Larkhall and then entered a contest for comic singers in Glasgow, the first time he had appeared there. He was offered more Glasgow dates and signed up for a tour of Scotland with a violinist, Mackenzie Murdoch.

In the summer of 1897, Lauder and Murdoch decided to become their own promoters and arranged a tour that lost them money. The following year, they spent much more on advertising and, from then on, their annual tours showed a good profit.

Until then, Harry Lauder had worked frequently as an Irish comedian and that was how he made his English debut in June 1898. The manager of the Argyle music hall in Birkenhead had been recommended to book him. Lauder was an instant success, running right through his repertoire of Irish songs and then returning with a medley of Scottish songs, which proved equally popular. The manager was so

pleased that he persuaded him to sign a long contract, guaranteeing him a booking every six months. His salary was to start at £8 a week and rise to £15. The success of Lauder's first appearance south of the border also convinced him to sing fewer Irish songs and concentrate on being a Scottish entertainer.

In 1900, Lauder saw Dan Leno at the Glasgow Empire. At a salary of £100 a week, Leno was singing London-style songs, which were not only understood, but relished by a Scottish audience. It set Lauder thinking. If Leno could earn big money singing English songs in Scotland, then he could be successful singing Scottish songs in London. In March 1900, he bought a single rail ticket to London and, after initial disappointment, eventually found work for just one night at Gatti's-in-the-Road, singing first, *Tobermory*, a song of humour and gusto, then the rollicking and jolly *Lass Of Killiecrankie* and finishing with an Irish character song, *Callig[h]an – Call Again!* The man who became his London agent, George Foster, saw him there:

The moment Harry Lauder waddled on to the stage at Gatti's that night, something happened. In a flash, I realised that a marvellous new star had dawned in the Variety firmament. I was not alone in seeing this. The entire audience realised it too. That night, Harry Lauder sang his way into instantaneous fame and fortune. During the rest of the week at Gatti's, I had every London and provincial manager down to hear him. They couldn't understand half he said or sang ... But everyone realised that he was a genius and that nothing like him had struck London for years⁶.

Lauder was booked for the rest of the week at a salary of £3.10s [£3.50]. He began appearing at other halls in London and, within five years, he was an established favourite.

One night in 1904, the stage doorkeeper at a hall he was playing handed him a fan letter, written in an obviously feminine hand and placed in a large pink envelope. The stage doorkeeper and Lauder discussed it for a few minutes, the doorkeeper commenting: "I suppose you do love a lassie, sir."

The words lodged in Lauder's mind and, the following day, he went to see the songwriter, Gerald Grafton, to start work on a song with the doorkeeper's words as a title. He sang it for the first time in *Aladdin* at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, at Christmas 1905 and it was the hit of the show:

I love a lassie, a bonnie, bonnie lassie.
She's as pure as the lily in the dell.
She's as sweet as the heather,
The bonnie bloomin' heather
Mary, ma Scotch bluebell.

Lauder either wrote or helped to write many of his hit songs. In 1910, he repeated his success in another Glasgow pantomime, *Red Riding Hood*, with *Roamin' In The Gloamin'*, a song he had dreamed up while watching young lovers walking at sunset near his home at Dunoon in the south-west of Argyll. Three further hits were just as popular: *Stop Yer Tickling*, *Jock* [1904], *A Wee Deoch-an-Doris* [1910] and [*Keep Right On To*] *The End of the Road* [1924]:

Keep right on to the end of the road.
Keep right on to the end.
Tho' the way be long,
Let your heart be strong.
Keep right on round the bend.
Though you're tired and weary,
Still journey on
Till you come to your happy abode.
Where all you love
You've been dreaming of
Will be there
At the end of the road.

In a review of Lauder at the Victoria Palace, James Agate seemed better disposed towards him than when he was reviewing Fyffe:

Here is an artist who is the living definition of a romantic actor. Lauder does more than interpret: he brings himself and his taste for living and the smack of life itself to each and all of his characters. Long before his soldier song was over, we knew all about the lad and the village carpenter had not finished his first verse before we were familiar with that she-walrus, his late-lamented⁷.

Lauder's manager used to ensure that, whenever the Great Man appeared in a new town, there was as much pomp and circumstance as he could arrange. Arriving in Brighton to play the Regent cinema during one carnival week, Harry was met at the station by Scottish pipers. Ceremonial visits were then paid to the Mayors of Brighton and Hove. They were followed by a press reception and a drive round the town to visit the carnival judges. Just before second house at the Regent, there was to be a formal welcome by Lady Chichester in the foyer, and so on. Billy Boardman, who was manager of the Hippodrome at the time, saw an opportunity of promoting his top of the bill entertainer, the comic singer, Wilkie Bard:

I had thousands of leaflets printed and distributed over Brighton to the effect that Mr Wilkie Bard would arrive at the station at 12.30, carrying his own suitcase and take a Corporation tram to the front entirely unattended. Here he would be received by the manager of the Hippodrome and a guard of honour composed of cleaners from the theatre. After a visit to the Aquarium, Mr Bard, having refused the pressing invitation to lunch with the two mayors, would take that meal at Aunt Betty's whelk stall on the Lower Parade ... I had bumper houses at the Hippodrome ... and, what was more, Sir Harry quite entered into the spirit of the merry jest⁸.

In 1907, Lauder made his transatlantic debut. When the offer was first made, he was not particularly interested. He was getting plenty of work in Britain and so, in the hope of deterring any further approaches from America, he asked George Foster to quote a ludicrously high figure. At the time, he was appearing in Liverpool for about £20 a week. He telegraphed his wife, Nance, asking her to go with him if, by any chance, the offer was accepted. Amazingly, it was. Nance's reply: see Book of Ruth Chapter One Verse Sixteen. Lauder looked up the quotation:

And Ruth said Entreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.

In the event, family commitments prevented Nance from going and so Lauder travelled to America with their fourteen-year-old son, John. He was billed to open at a matinee performance at the New York Theater in Times Square. Instead of the three songs he had planned to sing, he sang six. In the evening, there was so much cheering that he had to sing ten songs before he was allowed to leave the stage.

A review in *Variety* read:

Lauder is distinct, unique and a revelation in vaudeville. His Scotch dialect is broad at times, but it is not always necessary that he be heard to be understood⁹.

Lauder was an instant star. He returned to America in 1908 to appear at the Lincoln Square Theater for seventy minutes. Later in his career, he spent nearly a year touring America earning a total of \$120,000 in the process. In all, he made 25 working visits to the United States. One of the most extraordinary occurred in the winter of 1911. He was

due to open at a matinee show at the Manhattan Opera House, but the liner, on which he was crossing the Atlantic, was delayed by storms. It was clear the ship would not dock until late that evening. The matinee was cancelled and, to try to save the evening show, twenty supporting acts were lined up in place of the original five. Lauder finally appeared on stage just before 1am. His audience had waited for him.

In 1916, Lauder was appearing in a revue, *Three Cheers*, at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London. The high spot of the show was his song, *The Laddies Who Fought and Won*. At the same time, his son, now Captain John Lauder, was at the battlefield in France with the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. On New Year's Day 1917, Lauder was having coffee in the lounge of a London hotel when a pageboy handed him a telegram:

CAPTAIN JOHN LAUDER KILLED IN ACTION
DECEMBER 28th OFFICIAL WAR OFFICE

Three Cheers closed, but for only three nights to allow Lauder to return home to see Nance. On his reappearance at the Shaftesbury, while singing *The Laddies Who Fought and Won*, his voice faltered for a moment, but he composed himself and finished the show.

Lauder then decided to entertain Scottish troops abroad, the Argylls, the Black Watch, the Camerons, the Gordons and the Highland Light Infantry. With a party of entertainers, he left Folkestone in June 1917, taking with him a portable piano and thousands of packets of cigarettes. That same year, he launched the Harry Lauder Million-Pound Fund for Maimed Men, Scottish Soldiers and Sailors.

When he was knighted in 1919, the first popular entertainer to receive such an accolade, it was clear that the Establishment was extending music hall an increasingly warmer welcome.