

EILEEN LEDLIE

BY BARBARA BEST



Eileen Ledlie 1902 - 1980

At the beginning of the 1930's it appeared that Loughbrickland –born Eileen Ledlie had the world of grand opera at her feet. Blessed with a magnificent mezzo-soprano voice, she had given recitals at London's most prestigious venues and had received the most favourable reviews from some of the most influential music critics of the day. *"There seems every prospect of a brilliant career for her,"* wrote one enthusiastic reviewer but, somehow, it never happened.

Margaret Eileen Ledlie was born at Lakeview, Loughbrickland on the eve of St. Patrick's Day 1902, the daughter of William Ledlie and his wife Jeannie. By the time Eileen was born there were already five other children in the Ledlie household, the eldest of whom, William, was not yet eight years old. Six more children were to follow in rapid succession making up a grand family of eight boys and four girls. All of the Ledlie children attended Loughbrickland National School where the Principal at the time, was Master Joseph S. Boyd.

William Ledlie and his wife Jeannie, nee Henry, had come to live at Lakeview after their marriage in 1893. William had been born at Derrywilligan House, Mullaghglass, near Newry in 1860, and his wife Jeannie in the nearby townland of Crankey in 1868. Hence the family tag *"The Crankey Henrys."*

From an early age Eileen displayed an interest in music and somehow, amidst all the bustle of such a large family,

with new babies arriving almost annually, Eileen Ledlie's parents recognised that she had talent and arranged for her to be taken to Poyntzpass for weekly piano lessons with Mrs. Kathleen White.

Kathleen White was an accomplished pianist and organist. She was the wife of George Harrison White, then the stationmaster at Poyntzpass railway station. George White was renowned locally as a fine tenor and as an outstanding music teacher. He and his wife were much involved with various musical societies both locally and further afield. Kathleen White travelled regularly by train to Drogheda to play the organ in the Church of Ireland there, while her husband was, for many years, in charge of the choir in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral, Armagh.

There is no record that William Ledlie's people were particularly interested in music but Jeannie Ledlie's family, the Henrys, certainly were.

In the 1920's Nathaniel Henry of Goragh, Eileen's uncle, was responsible for assembling a group of local musicians, known as *"The Walden String Orchestra"*. Most members of the orchestra were pupils of Nathaniel Henry's wife, Alma, a talented violin teacher.

Numbering around twenty musicians, the Orchestra included six members of the Henry family who played a variety of string instruments, violin, viola, cello and double bass. This orchestra, with various local singers, staged several Gilbert and Sullivan operas including *"H.M.S. Pinafore"* and *"The Pirates of Penzance"* and supported musical societies in Newry, Portadown, Lurgan and Armagh. The Walden String Orchestra won many awards including the Perpetual Challenge Cup for Strings at Newry Musical Feis, annually from 1930 until the outbreak of war in 1939.

Kathleen White found in young Eileen Ledlie a keen and exceptionally talented student who was very receptive and eager to learn but, while her piano playing progressed well, it was the potential of Eileen's singing voice that really excited Kathleen White and her husband.

Having recognised Eileen's talent and tested her commitment, George White enthusiastically undertook the task of developing and training her. Eileen Ledlie's first success of note was when she entered the Belfast Musical Feis and won the Gold Medal in the contralto class. On that occasion Kathleen White accompanied her at the piano.

As a direct result of this success, Eileen was awarded a



Ticket for Eileen Ledlie's Song Recital - Ulster Hall 1928

scholarship to The Royal College of Music in London and, encouraged by her parents and the Whites, she took up the offer and moved to London. Eileen considered herself to be the rebel of the family, not only because she left home to go to London while still so young, but also because she was the only one of the four sisters not to marry a son of the neighbouring family of Alexander and Frances Buller of Brickland.

In London, she shared an apartment with Winifred Wonnacott, a student at the Royal College of Art. Winifred was from Holywood, Co. Down and she and Eileen formed a friendship which lasted all their lives. Among their circle of friends was Charles Tunnicliffe, an art student at the RCA who became famous for his drawings and paintings of wildlife. When he and Winifred married, Eileen shared their home for a short time until she herself married. Tunnicliffe, then largely unknown, was at the time busily preparing woodcuts to illustrate Henry Williamson's classic tale of "*Tarka the Otter*".

WIGMORE HALL
Wednesday July 10th, 1935, at 8.30

AUGUSTUS MILNER
PRESENTS
NAN DALLAS
ELLA HOCKADAY
EILEEN LEDLIE
LOUISE LOCKWOOD
MAY MOORE
SYLVIA MORGAN

in a programme of
ARIAS, SONGS and DUETS
Pianoforte - DORA MILNER
Bösendorfer Grand Pianoforte

Tickets (including Tax)—Reserved 5/9 and 3/6, unreserved 2/4, may be obtained at the Box Office, Wigmore Hall, and usual Ticket Offices.

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Poster for concert - 1935

Her tuition at the Royal College of Music was under the supervision of Dr. Augustus Milner, a leading teacher of singing at the time and under his influence Eileen blossomed and her voice developed into a powerful and rich mezzo-soprano.

By 1927, Augustus Milner decided that Eileen Ledlie was ready to make her debut on the London concert scene, and so on Wednesday May 11th, at the age of 25, she gave her first recital, at London's Grottrian Hall. The programme she undertook was a challenging one, consisting of songs and arias by the great composers of the past such as Bach, Haydn and Purcell as well as more contemporary works by Bruneau, Bantock and Herbert Hughes. She was accompanied at the piano by Dora Milner, her tutor's wife.

In all, her recital, which consisted of nineteen items, included three encores, was given an enthusiastic reception, every item being received "*with prolonged applause*".

The following day "*The Daily Telegraph*" music critic wrote that "*....Miss Ledlie is to be congratulated on a remarkably successful recital. Her voice is a high mezzo-soprano of large range and fine quality. Its power is great andwould be able to fill an opera house quite easily*".

During 1927 and 1928, Eileen Ledlie also performed in concerts in The Wigmore Hall, London and in The Ulster Hall, Belfast, and with the Belfast (Radio or wireless) Station Orchestra.

In January 1929, whilst enjoying a degree of success in her singing career, Eileen unfortunately married her agent, A.G. Steil, who was also a singer. It may be that Steil was jealous of Eileen's success, or that he was overly possessive of his new wife, but her singing career seems to have faded just as it was blossoming.

The marriage was not a success, there were no children and divorce was perhaps only a distant hope for the beleaguered Eileen when she met John Atkinson at a Conservative Meeting in London. They fell deeply in love, instantly in John's case, and carried on a clandestine and very passionate relationship, mostly by letter. John called Eileen his "*darling Precious Girl*" and said "*yesterday I thought it is not possible to love her any more but today the impossible has happened and I love you ten thousand times more*" ... *life with you my Precious One would be one long sweet song*".

Eileen and John arranged that Eileen would leave her husband, but on the appointed day, a cousin of Eileen's who had been staying, had been unwell and was forced to stay on longer than had been planned, and so the cousin had to flee the house with the runaway.

Divorce from her first husband and agent followed, and

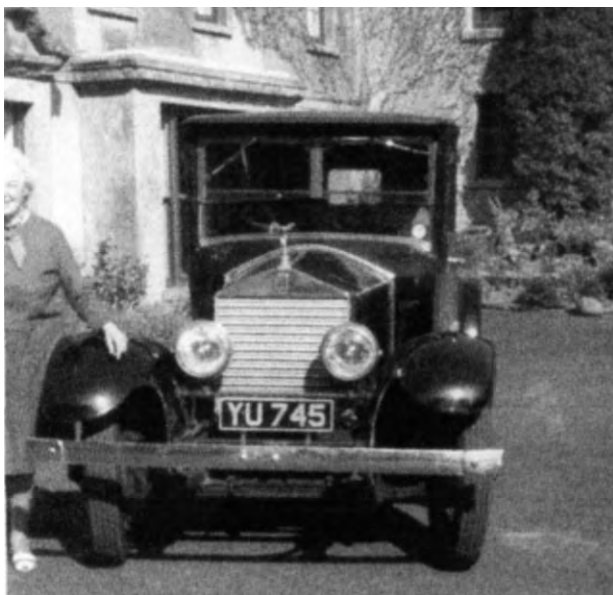
then in 1943, aged forty-one, Eileen married John Atkinson, then fifty five. Their “long sweet song” lasted for eighteen years, and although John Atkinson was also very possessive of his “Precious Girl”, they had a happy and interesting married life.



Poster for concert in Wigmore Hall - 1935

Eileen had by now left off her professional singing career, which had coincided with a very unhappy time in her life. Also, John Atkinson was reluctant to share her with the world, and her singing was now for those she knew well and enjoyed singing with, in particular, George White and the Newry Philharmonic Society, and Rathfriland Choral Society. Her voice was such however, that in later life, she did not even sing in church because if she did, everyone else stopped singing to listen to her.

John Atkinson, originally from Derriagh, was in business in the manufacture of tubular furniture, hospital trolleys, airport steps and the like, based in Basingstoke. He was also something of an expert on cars and aeroplanes. Eileen took to this new aspect of her life with gusto, and when she and John retired to live in Donaghadee, Eileen



Eileen with her Rolls Royce “Genevieve”

became more renowned for waving regally from their 1927 Rolls Royce than for her singing. The car, named ‘Genevieve’ always caused a stir and was a familiar sight in Poyntzpass when Eileen came to visit her brother Harry Ledlie and sister in law Gertie (nee Little) who lived in Church Street, or her sister Olive Buller in Scarvagh House. Having been beautifully maintained for many years by Eileen’s friend Rodney, the car passed to his ownership on Eileen’s death in 1980.

Undoubtedly a colourful and very talented lady, Eileen was also a keen author, submitting stories to the BBC for the children’s afternoon programme ‘Jackanory’. Her personal standards and attainments were high, and she expected no less of her great-nieces and nephews, whose letters were sometimes returned with corrections boldly marked in red pen. An excellent cook, an enthusiastic gardener, a wonderful seamstress who made many of her own dresses and jackets, Eileen was also warm, loving and charismatic, with great strength of personality.

Eileen Ledlie might have spent her life in the glare of the lights of La Scala or the Royal Opera House. Having had her brief years of fame, however, she chose a quieter life of companionship with her second husband.



Eileen’s Home at Rostrevor

Following John Atkinson’s death in 1961, Eileen spent her late years in the beautiful surroundings of the Gate Lodge of Clooneavon House, Rostrevor, at the foot of the Mourne. There she tended her garden and spent time with family and friends, always with just something of the air of a diva, though never with pomposity of presumption. At seventy-eight years of age, Eileen suffered a stroke. A short time later, on 15th of December 1980, Eileen Atkinson nee Ledlie died peacefully in Daisy Hill Hospital.

Her headstone in the churchyard of Loughbrickland Presbyterian Church bears just her name. Singled out in death, as she was in life, although surrounded by the graves of her parents and brothers.