

DAME Nellie Melba made her debut at the age of six in the Australian bush singing the Scottish folk song 'Comin' Thro' The Rye'. Her father was a farmer's son who left Forfarshire with 200 gold sovereigns 199 of which were stolen during a mutiny on board ship. With the remaining sovereign he established himself and his Scottish Presbyterianism forty-five miles from Melbourne.

Although the young Nellie adored her father — her mother died young — her ebullient personality burst through his repressive creed of gloom and guilt. Playing the organ for a service she disgraced herself by breaking into 'See me Dance the Polka'; and married an Irishman.

To Europe she came to study singing and ultimately became an international star lionised by the crowned heads of Europe and Russia and America's wealthiest socialites. Escoffier of the Ritz created an immortal pudding in her honour: Pêche Melba. And in Edwardian London she met the son of a Scots carpenter George Lord Mount Stephen whose country seat was Bocket Hall, Welwyn. Lord Mount Stephen and his second wife Gean loved music and, in common with the whole world, loved Nellie Melba.

But music and Scotland were not the sole links that forged their friendship. Dame Nellie's name of Melba derived from the city in Australia where she grew up, first learned to sing before an audience, and loved with a fierce loyalty. Home to Melba was Melbourne and Melbourne, Australia, was so named for William Lamb Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's first and favourite Prime Minister, whose home Bocket Hall had once been. To Bocket Dame Nellie was invited several times.

On her visits to Bocket Lord Mount Stephen confided youthful memories to Melba. Of running twelve miles barefoot over Scottish stubble fields to deliver a letter for his father's Laird the Duke of Richmond, grateful for the reward of a shilling. One of eight children, George left school at

Dame Nellie Melba as Marguerite in Gounod's Faust.



Melba at Bocket

When the famous opera star, lionised by the wealthiest societies of Europe and America, met George Lord Mount Stephen whose country seat was Bocket Hall, Welwyn . . .

fourteen, worked as an ostler at the Fife Arms in Dufftown before being apprenticed to a hatter called Sinclair at The Bonnet Emporium, Aberdeen. When he was nineteen he walked most of the way to London where he found employment at a clothier's in St. Paul's Churchyard for £20 a year "all found". In 1848 he to his surprise found his hand shaken by the excited King Louis Philippe of France outside the Mansion House, the first of many royal handshakes.

From St. Paul's London to St. Paul's Street, Montreal, Canada. "A man would just have to be born asleep if he could not have got on in Canada in those days," he told Melba.

The charm of Bocket, said Melba, was the variety of

people to be met while there for George Lord Mount Stephen never forgot an old friend. Cosmopolitan guests like Melba, whose origins were as humble as her host's, helped to put all at ease.

Gean Lady Mount Stephen had not expected to marry at all and found herself a bride late in life. Sadly, their only child, born at Bocket, did not live. Mount Stephen found the wealth he amassed as one of the founders of the Canadian Pacific Railway difficult to resolve with a nonconformist conscience and frugal habits. His eagle eye would search out a new punt on the Bocket lake or new dishes in the Bocket dining-room to his wife's dismay. He would publicly reprove her for her extravagance.

Nonconformist men revere practicality and distrust display but find irresistible the sparkle of precious stones. The old Scots-Canadian peer heaped his modest middleaged wife with jewels she scarcely knew how to wear: diamonds, pearls, emeralds filled velvet cases in her dressing-room at Bocket. Among them were not one but two diamond necklaces. Lady Mount Stephen had scored over her husband by finding the second necklace hidden in the Bocket library. Whose was the bosom these diamonds had been bought to adorn? she quietly inquired of her husband. The necklace was hers, confessed the conscience-stricken peer.

To the international diva whose own jewellery and resplendent costumes adorned opera stage, concert platform and salon with éclat, Lady Mount Stephen diffidently displayed earrings, brooches, bracelets, a tiara and the two diamond necklaces. Melba persuaded Lady Mount Stephen to make a great show at dinner that night by wearing them all together to the admiration of everyone present.

When Melba's visit drew to a close a last morning was spent in the sunshiny porch added to the east front of Bocket Hall. Lord and Lady Mount Stephen requested Melba to sing for them one last song, her fans' favourite encore, the Scottish folk song 'Coming Thro' The Rye'.

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by Margaret Worth



George Lord Mount Stephen of Bocket.