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GREEK DRAMA IN THE GREAT HALL, 1886

G. L. Fischer
University Archivist

The papers of Archibald Liversidge, (1847-1927), Professor of Chemistry from 1899 to 1907, include many photographs relating to his personal and academic life. Of somewhat unusual interest is a series of photographs made by C. Bayliss, a Sydney photographer, which depict scenes and characters from Aeschylus' play Agamemnon as performed by students of the University of Sydney in June, 1886. Two of these photographs are reproduced in these pages.

The cast of Agamemnon, posed in front of the Great Hall. Agamemnon stands in the centre of a tableau with the other principals and chorus.

The date of the Great Hall adapted for the play Agamemnon.

Two public performances of the play were given in the Great Hall—on the 15th and 25th June, 1886. Contemporary newspaper cuttings preserved by the Registrar's Office give some details of the occasions. The performances were prompted partly by contemporary English and American university interest in classical plays—it was 'merely a matter of course that our own seats of learning would follow suit'. A committee of students and staff was formed to make arrangements for the play: Walter Scott (1835-1903), Professor of Classics, was the President. The play was done in Greek. For this reason the press regarded the production as scarcely more than a 'scholastic exercise', though, at the same time, seized the chance to chide those citizens who were 'tempted by the bustle of everyday life to allow their Greek to become rusty'.

There were good houses for both performances, despite rough weather and likely transport difficulties. The audiences were said to comprise the 'elite of New South Wales society', and dressing was formal with 'rich costumes of the ladies and the scholastic robes of those who have distinguished themselves in the study of the classics'. An orchestra provided an overture and accompanied the chorus. Though the music, composed by Hector MacLean, was thought to obtrude some unnecessary modernism into the evening, and while opinion varied as to its quality, still it apparently prevented the 'half-choral, half-recitative' from becoming wearisome.

Surprisingly, all the roles were taken by male students, even though women students were now attending the University. Agamemnon was played by Robert Randolph Garnan (B.A. 1883, M.A. 1886), Aristaeus by Leopold Edward Flood Neill (B.A. 1886, M.B., Ch.M. 1890), Clytemnestra by Harry Ambrose Russell (B.A. 1887), and Cassandra by Gustav Hugh Leibins (B.A. 1889).

The press was not greatly enthusiastic about the production, and though mindful of the effort of the students, tended to damn with faint praise by saying "the drama, though recited in a dead language, was in some measure filled with life...". For the play committee there was worse to follow—a deficit of $20 on the venture. In meeting this from his own pocket, Professor Scott manifested his generous practical faith in classical learning.

1 University Archives 7/F.
2 The collection includes some photographs made by Liversidge himself: in this activity he continued a notable tradition established by his predecessor, Professor John Smith.
3 University Archives Cg/02/S, p. 51. A printed programme is also held in the University Archives.
4 Garnan became Commonwealth Solicitor-General, and was knighted.