

A.C. Lenton (1887-1949)

by Patricia Kovacic

Based on a talk given by his grand-daughter, Patricia Kovacic, at the Melbourne Organ Weekend, 21 October, 2000

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Alfred Chislett Lenton was a talented musician. He lived his life with great enthusiasm and passion, and considered himself very fortunate to be able to earn a living doing what he loved best. Alfred was born in 1887, and he was the eldest of seven children. His father was a bootmaker, who became Mayor of the inner Sydney suburb of Waterloo in the early 1900s. Alfred's mother had been a Miss Chislett, and the gift of music seemed to come from her side of the family.

Alfred's musical talent emerged in his early years, and when he was 15 years old he became honorary morning organist at St. Luke's Presbyterian Church, Redfern. It is not known what type of instrument Alfred played here from 1902 to 1905. At the age of 18 Alfred was appointed organist at St Matthew's, Bondi, where he played the pipe organ of two manuals, pedals and about nine stops, circa 1860, by an unknown maker. During this time he studied with Arthur Mason, the Sydney City Organist. Perhaps Alfred moved to his next position at St Stephen's, Willoughby in 1907 so that he could play the Fincham organ of two manuals and pedals which had been installed there in 1904 under the supervision of Arthur Mason. This organ was replaced in 1929. The beautiful church of St. John the Evangelist, Bishopthorpe, Glebe was Alfred's next appointment in 1909. Here he played the pipe organ of two manuals, 18 stops and 5 couplers built in 1884 by the English organbuilders, Forster and Andrews. While Alfred was organist at St John's, he fell in love with a stunning young lady who sang in the choir. She was Elsie Caroline Harris, and Alfred and Elsie were married at St John's in 1912. My father, Kenneth Alfred was born the following year, and his brother, Maurice Chislett was born in 1915.

Alfred took up a new position at All Saints', Petersham in 1911. In 1886, the English organ builders, Alfred Hunter and Sons supplied the pipe organ of two manuals, pedals and 17 stops for this church. This pipe organ was possibly the first with tubular pneumatic action in Sydney, and it was installed in All Saints' by William Davidson. In 1913, Alfred gave a recital for the 43rd anniversary of the dedication of the church. He received an enthusiastic review in the All Saints' Parish Paper of December, 1913:

'Congratulations to Mr. A.C. Lenton on the fine recital given on Tuesday evening 11th November! In a wonderful manner Mr. Lenton showed his mastery over the organ, and amply proved himself as promising to become one of the finest Australian organists. The programme was a most exacting one. Especially interesting was his interpretation of Bach's Great Fugue in G Minor, and Merkel's Sonata in D Minor, two veritable gems in organ literature.'

Alfred Lenton became organist and choirmaster at St Paul's, Burwood in 1914. Here he played William Davidson's fine pipe organ of 1889 - 1891. This instrument of three manuals, pedals and 26 stops is the largest example of William Davidson's work remaining in original condition.*

The Church Music Society of Australia was formed in 1923 to create a new interest in music in worship. At the end of 1924 there were 64 members, and Alfred held the

position of Secretary.

ACROSS THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

In 1925, enticed by many glowing promises, Alfred accepted the position of organist and choirmaster at All Saints' Cathedral, Bathurst. He resigned from his positions at St Paul's Burwood, and as Secretary of the Church Music Society of Australia. It was a big wrench for the Lenton family to leave Sydney, but Alfred was full of optimism, so they sold their house in Frederick Street, Ashfield, bought a new Chevrolet Grand Tourer, and headed west over the Blue Mountains.

At All Saints', Bathurst, Alfred played the 1886 Brindley and Foster organ which had been rebuilt by Charles Leggo in 1922. My father, Ken, made some notes about the organ blower at that time:

'Wind for the organ was supplied by a gas engine, and the starting process was a sight not to be missed. After pre-heating the mercury ignition tube it was usual to swing the engine for manual crank - turn on the gas - release the decompressor and run for the open door of the engine room. When the engine had almost stopped revolving there was often a most shattering explosion of frightening proportions which scared off all those brave souls who had ventured too close.'

In addition to his duties as Cathedral organist, Alfred taught music at All Saints' College, and at Marsden School for Girls at Kelso. The Lenton family stayed in Bathurst for about three years. \In 1928, a dramatic event occurred at All Saints' Church in Melbourne's fashionable East St Kilda that changed Alfred's life again. The organist, Mr Inge, suffered a fatal heart attack during evensong and slumped forward onto the organ keys. Subsequently, the vicar, the Revd John Jones, invited Alfred to apply for the position of organist and choirmaster.

OFF TO MELBOURNE

So the Lentons moved to Melbourne, and Alfred took up his new appointment at All Saints', East St Kilda in 1928. The All Saints pipe organ of three manuals, pedals and 45 stops was built and installed by W.L. Roberts of Adelaide in 1924. The total cost was £4,000, and the opening recital was given by Dr A.E. Floyd.

The Lenton family soon settled in to their new life in Melbourne, and Alfred managed to find some time for his hobbies. As with his music, he also threw himself wholeheartedly into his interests. A keen photographer, he would sometimes catch a train to the Dandenongs to photograph scenic locations. He also took great delight in growing dahlias, and kept meticulous lists of names, planting times and other details. Alfred entered his dahlias in flower shows, and was delighted if he was fortunate enough to win a prize. Alfred and his sons were dedicated golfers, and there are family stories about rivalry and skulduggery on the golf course between Alfred, Ken and Maurice.

Alfred Lenton was never a wealthy man in monetary terms. He had to eke out his money through Lent when no weddings were held, as he relied on this extra income to make ends meet. But he was a wealthy man through his love of music and passion for life.

There were over 40 male choristers in the All Saints' choir in the 1930s and 40s, and those who attended services still remember the beauty of the music. Alfred gave it his all. Alan Eustace, a former member of the All Saints' choir, recalls that choir practices were models of discipline, concentration, spontaneous humour and beautiful singing.

FORMATION OF THE SOCIETY OF ORGANISTS

The Society of Organists (Vic.) was formed in 1938 with Herbert Davis as the first President and Alfred Lenton the first Secretary. Alfred remained as Secretary until the end of 1943, when he became President. The first Treasurer was Mr R.E.V. Church and Mr Harold Rooksby was a member of the first council. The first meeting of the Society of Organists was held in The Scot's Church Hall, Melbourne.

My father, Ken, was very close to his father, and often sat at the organ to turn pages. I remember Dad's vivid description of a service at All Saints' when an Army band conducted by Sergeant Cobb was accompanied by the organ. Sergeant Cobb arranged with Alfred that if he raised his arm in a certain way he wanted more volume from the organ. It was stirring music, and when Alfred looked in his mirror he saw Sergeant Cobb motioning for more volume. He added more stops, looked in the mirror again and saw Sergeant Cobb still indicating for more volume. This continued until Alfred had the All Saints' organ flat out. He looked in the mirror again and there was Sergeant Cobb still wanting more. Alfred said later, "I was so excited I nearly fell off the organ bench".

Alfred Lenton stayed at All Saints', East St. Kilda for the rest of his life. In February 1949 the annual choir picnic was held by Mordialloc Creek. As was his usual custom, Alfred took some of the choirboys for a row, enthusiastically taking the oars. But he suffered a massive heart attack that evening, and died the next day. At his request his ashes were scattered in the small garden near the choir room at All Saints'. Today, if you visit All Saints', East St Kilda, you will find there is a brass plaque in memory of Alfred Chislett Lenton located behind the choir stalls.

Alfred Lenton came from a large family who lived in the working class suburbs of Sydney. Despite the pleas of his parents that he get a 'proper job' he embraced music and made it his career as well as his passion. He was a dedicated musician, and throughout his life his music brought joy to many people. Alfred Lenton and his contemporaries have left a lasting legacy to Australian pipe organists of the future.

* In 2001, St. Paul's Parish has raised \$80,000 enabling restoration work to be commenced by Peter D.G. Jewkes Pty. Ltd

Bibliography

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Patricia Lenton (Kovacic) was attending kindergarten for the first time on the day her Grandfather died. The memories she has of him are like little snapshots, the most vivid by far being Alfred playing the piano for her. He played the Toccata in A by Paradisi (Paradies) while she stood transfixed at the end of the piano, her eyes just at key level, watching his hands fly over the notes. Patricia would like to thank her mother, Jean H. Lenton, for her help with information about A.C. Lenton.