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## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Suzanne Robinson, ed. *Passions of a Mighty Heart: Selected Letters of G.W.L. Marshall-Hall***

Melbourne: Lyrebird Press, 2015

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**Reviewed by Matthew Lorenzon**

George William Louis Marshall-Hall probably didn't expect the small but dedicated academic field that would grow up around him when he arrived in Australia to take up the newly created Ormond Chair of Music in 1891. As the controversial figure faded from living memory, Thérèse Radic and Warren Bebbington's pioneering work started a wave of scholarship that continues to this day.<sup>1</sup> Slowly but surely, scholars restored colour and life to a figure whose bust had languished for the better half of a century in a storeroom at the back of Melba Hall. A symposium at the Grainger Museum in 2010 led to a much-overdue collection of articles which represent (in the editors' words) 'for many of its authors ... twenty or more years of researching and thinking about the place of Marshall-Hall in the history of the arts in Melbourne.'<sup>2</sup>

The field of Marshall-Hall studies has given not just colour and life to Marshall-Hall, but thickness too. The detailed studies by Thérèse Radic, Suzanne Robinson, Kerry Murphy, Jennifer Hill, Peter Tregear, and many others, paint a portrait of a nuanced individual changed by a changing world. This new, three-dimensional Marshall-Hall is a potent antidote to the caricatures of the Nietzschean warmonger or socialist Wagnerite that crop up in broader histories.<sup>3</sup>

Suzanne Robinson's recent collection of Marshall-Hall's letters, *Passions of a Mighty Heart: Selected Letters of G. W. L. Marshall-Hall*, represents the pinnacle of Marshall-Hall's reconstitution. Representing over a decade of research by Robinson, the collection brings together letters from

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<sup>1</sup> A full bibliography of primary and secondary literature on Marshall-Hall can be found in Thérèse Radic and Suzanne Robinson, eds, *Marshall-Hall's Melbourne: Music, Art and Controversy 1891–1915* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Radic and Robinson, eds, *Marshall-Hall's Melbourne*, vii.

<sup>3</sup> Manning Clark, *The People Make Laws: 1888–1915* (Melbourne: MUP, 1981), 412; John Docker, *The Nervous Nineties: Australian Cultural Life in the 1890s* (Melbourne: OUP, 1991), 58.

both publicly accessible archives, such as those at the University of Melbourne, the Grainger Museum, the Mitchell Library and the National Library of Australia, and numerous private collections, including those of Oliver Streeton, Richard Divall and Katherine Barnett. Through four parts and 249 letters, the reader follows Marshall-Hall through skirmishes with the press, scandals, and war.

Part One covers the years 1862 to 1890, prior to his arrival in Australia. The section includes valuable transcriptions of Marshall-Hall's letters to the editors of the British newspapers *School* and *The Musical World*, some of which are only elsewhere available as scrapbook clippings in the archives of the Grainger Museum. Part Two covers Marshall-Hall's years in the Chair, 1891 to 1900. These are Marshall-Hall's scandal-ridden years in Australian bohemia and it is a delight to read his letters penned to the painters Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton during this period. Robinson includes Marshall-Hall's spirited rebuttals to attacks on his published lectures in *The Argus*. Many readers will be unaware of Marshall-Hall's activities after his contract for the Ormond Chair was not renewed in 1901, however the period leading up to 1901 constitutes only one third of Robinson's volume.

In Part Three, 1901 to 1913, Marshall-Hall is busy running his rival conservatorium and, what is perhaps his most valuable contribution to Melbourne's musical life, the Marshall-Hall Orchestra. This is a particularly richly documented period thanks to the preservation of Marshall-Hall's letters by his friends Sir James Barrett, Herbert Brookes and the linguist Frederick Sefton Delmer. Marshall-Hall wrote a great many letters to these friends during a visit to Berlin in 1907, despite suffering from an ocular infection. This era closes in impenetrable darkness, the Marshall-Hall Orchestra collapsing under pressures from the Musician's Union and Marshall-Hall's voyage to Europe to secure performances of his operas *Romeo and Juliet* and *Stella* meeting with innumerable difficulties.

A somewhat cheerier Marshall-Hall greets the reader in Part Four, 1913 to 1915, after *Stella* has met with some success and *Romeo and Juliet* is to be published. Marshall-Hall was invited back to Australia just as the First World War broke out and he returned to take up the Ormond Chair of Music brimming with plans for educational reform (including the novel method of Otto Fischer Sobell—to relax as one is singing). Then, just like that, peritonitis cuts Marshall-Hall's voice off mid-stream.

It is not so much the main landmarks of Marshall-Hall's life—all of which have been written about elsewhere—but the rich incidental detail that makes this collection such a joy to read. Part One contains Marshall-Hall's application for the Ormond Chair of Music: a short, scrawled, despair-inducing document for anyone applying for academic positions today. Part Two is marked by the contradiction between Marshall-Hall's open baiting of the religious establishment (including a particularly fine address evoking the spirit of Robert Burns and 'the immortal Guglielmus Sanctissimus of Wyselaskie-hall' (p. 63)) and letters to friends bemoaning the need to defend his opinions in the press. As the years pass, Marshall-Hall's frustration at having to respond to the press becomes more sincere before turning to open mortification.

In Marshall-Hall's day-to-day correspondence with Sir James Barrett in Part Three, one finds a pragmatist carefully going about the business of a conservatorium director and orchestra conductor. Marshall-Hall manages staff politics, advises students on syllabus matters, and wrangles with the perennial problem of inadequate rehearsal time. He peppers business-like correspondence with candid descriptions of players, writing that the trombonists 'are quite

unused to the work, & to what they call “strict” playing (ie. playing the written notes)’(p. 126). For conductors he has the memorable observation that ‘a conductor without *pps* will not bear thinking on, for pianissimo comes next to godliness’ (p. 106). After all Marshall-Hall’s polyglot grandstanding, the voyage to Berlin provides humorous anecdotes of his trouble with the local language, including referring to a shower as a ‘Niagara.’ Once in Berlin, the reader has a front-row seat for Marshall-Hall’s blossoming infatuation with the smoky Hungarian conductor Arthur Nikisch. Other curiosities include a letter from Sir James Barrett claiming responsibility for *Stella* being taken up in London through his connections in the Victoria League. *Stella*’s performance came about by quite different means and Marshall-Hall copiously annotated Barrett’s letter (entitling it ‘the letter of a bounder’) and sent it to Brookes—except he enclosed it in the wrong envelope (p. 186). So it is that through a series of miscommunications Barrett’s own overbearing tone is preserved for posterity in this volume of Marshall-Hall’s correspondence. The First World War broke out as Marshall-Hall was on vacation in Switzerland with the Wertheimer family, including their daughter Ella (providing the occasion for some flirtatious note-passing by way of the boots outside Marshall-Hall’s room) (p. 193). Marshall-Hall’s adrenaline-fuelled letters from Europe at the outbreak of the First World War make for chilling reading. They are one part childish enthusiasm—such as one finds in Marshall-Hall’s early writings—and two parts realistic horror at a world gone mad.

Robinson’s wide knowledge of Marshall-Hall’s context carefully guides the reader with footnotes and images, making it thrilling reading for all who have a live interest in the cultural history of the period. As a scholarly work, the utility of *Passions of a Mighty Heart* cannot be understated. The book is more than a gift to future scholars; it is a uniquely articulate window into the cultural and civic lives of turn-of-the-century Melbourne and London.

#### **About the Reviewer**

Matthew Lorenzon is a musicologist and journalist specialising in contemporary music. He is the founder of the Melbourne Music Analysis Summer School and the Partial Durations contemporary music blog. He holds a doctorate in Musicology from the Australian National University and a Master of Arts in English Language and Literature from the University of Melbourne, where he studied the literary works of G.W.L. Marshall-Hall.