

Melba house, sometimes called Nightingale's Rest, was built in 1882/1883 as the home for the Marian Mill Plantation manager Mr. Charles Armstrong and his wife Helen Porter (nee) Mitchell. The eldest of eight children of Melbourne Builder David Mitchell and his wife Isabella (nee Dow), Nellie (as she was called by her family) was used to city life and the benefits of a wealthy family. She was ill prepared to be the wife of a sugarcane plantation manager in the back blocks of central Queensland.

The Mackay region had been originally settled for cattle runs, however the sugar industry promised richer rewards for those prepared to take a risk in the fledgling industry. David Mitchell had invested in Mackay sugar properties and came to the region in August of 1882 to build a sugar mill for the Marian Plantation. His wife had recently died, entrusting the care of her youngest daughter Vera to Nellie's care. Sadly, Vera died of a childhood disease just four months after her mother's death. Nellie was distraught. David Mitchell decided to take Nellie with him to Mackay, hoping the change of scenery would help her out of her depression.

The Mitchell's were feted by Mackay society, as was Charles Armstrong – the youngest son of an English Baronette. The pair met, fell in love and were married in Brisbane on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1882 (a somewhat whirlwind romance, as the Mitchell's only arrived in Mackay in early September 1882).

After a lengthy honeymoon in Victoria, the couple settled in Marian in April 1883. Nellie was already pregnant with their son George (who was born on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1883) coupled with the hot, humid conditions and with the heavy clothing commonly worn at the time, Nellie's normally short temper must have been set with a hair trigger. Armstrong was also quick tempered, and anecdotes abound of the explosive nature of their marriage.

In particular, Nellie missed her music. She had been taught to sing and play the piano by her aunts and school teachers, and at age 12 was an organist at Scots Church, Melbourne. As a young adult she took singing lessons from noted Italian tenor Pietro Cecchi. Despite being a popular choice to sing and as accompanist at charity functions and dinner parties, Nellie dreamed of following her desire to perform professionally, but saw no chance of that happening as she languished in the back blocks of Mackay, especially since her husband was totally opposed to the idea of Nellie appearing on stage.

By January of 1884, Nellie had had enough of life in Mackay and, taking her infant son with her, returned to Melbourne to live. Three months later, Armstrong went to Melbourne to attempt a reconciliation and to persuade Nellie to return to Mackay. Nellie swore that she would never set foot in Mackay again – and she never did.

In 1886, David Mitchell was appointed Victoria's Agent to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition being held in London. He was accompanied by his daughters Annie and Bella, as well as Nellie, Charles and baby George. Charles' mother had retired to live in Sussex following the death of her husband, and Nellie formed a close relationship with her mother-in-law.

Nellie had obtained letters of introduction from her music contacts in Australia and attempted to find singing engagements in London, without success. When her father and sisters were preparing to return to Australia at the end of 1886, Nellie played her last card asking her father to allow her to study with Madame Mathilda Marchesi in Paris. David Mitchell reluctantly agreed to allow Nellie 12 months support to achieve her goals with the understanding that if she was not successful by then she was to return to Australia.

It is a matter of history that Marchesi gave the final polish to Nellie's voice and in September of 1887, Melba was heralded as the next great voice of opera – the beginning of a 40 year career at some of the greatest Opera Houses in Europe and America, including some 36 years as a headline performer at Covent Garden; a stellar career which brought Nellie fame and fortune.

Nellie's dedication to singing is exemplified by reports that towards the end of her life she still spent 5 to 6 hours a day practicing.

Nellie died on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1931 after a protracted illness believed to result from facial surgery performed in Italy some two years before her death.

We are fortunate that Nellie's business sense made her break with tradition and put her voice on record (most opera singers believed that people would not come to their theatre performances if recordings were available). Metal masters of Nellie's 1904 recordings were found in the vaults at Deutsche Grammophon in 2008, having survived the bombings of WWII, and new vinyl discs were made from these and released to the public.