

Lola Montez Down Under

H

aving lived in a few colonies, I was always struck by the measure of deference accorded to visiting personalities.

The big names of sport, television, theatre, or whatever, were hungrily and warmly welcomed by the colonists and expatriates, perhaps because the general condition in those places was somewhat anorexic when it came to degrees of excellence in the entertainment fields. Stars were scarce, particularly good ones. By all accounts, things were much the same in the 1850s when Lola Montez, the celebrated Irish courtesan and dancer, hit the Australian colony.

Lola's notoriety prevented her from being invited to lunch by the Bishop of Sydney, who in fact did entertain another theatrical colleague of hers, Ms Catherine Hayes of Limerick, who was playing at a neighbouring theatre. Presumably, the same impediment would have prevented the Attorney-General from inviting Lola to dinner, even though he, too, lavishly entertained Ms. Hayes. But one is puzzled though by the Sydney Town Council who gave an address of welcome to a visiting Scottish conjurer, 'Professor' Anderson, who used to pull rabbits out of tall hats, but did not acknowledge the arrival of the far more accomplished, and internationally acclaimed, Lola. Notwithstanding these minor rebuffs, she quickly won the hearts of audiences and emptied opposition theatres. The Andersons of the colony she rapidly left in her wake as she cut a swathe through Australian theatrical history which has easily survived to this day.

Lola Montez was an extraordinary woman. Over two dozen biographers have written of her. And all agree that she was something special. Even at a distance of 130 years one can easily see why. She was extremely beautiful, very intelligent and outrageously flamboyant. In her day she excited the attention of not only Australia but also of Europe and America. And, like many other famous people, she generated an ample share of begrudgery too. As one writer remarked: 'A woman who in the full light of the nineteenth century renewed all the scandals that disgraced the Middle Ages, and, with an audacity that is almost unparalleled, seated herself upon the steps of a throne....' But I am sure even the best of our home-grown begrudgers would concede that it was not all her fault. Men found her irresistible. 'When you met Lola Mon-

by Michael McCarthy

tez, her reputation made you automatically think of bedrooms', said Aldous Huxley.

Lola Montez's origins are quite confusing. In fact, she has been given as many birthplaces as she has biographers; and, geographically, they are quite disparate - Madrid, Constantinople, Lucerne, Calcutta, Seville! However, nowadays it is generally agreed that she was born in Limerick in 1816. She was the daughter of Ensign Edward Gilbert, a young Irish officer in the 25th Foot Regiment, who had married one of the Olivers of Castle Oliver, Co. Limerick. She was christened Marie

Dolores Eliza Rosanna, but this was quickly contracted to Lola. When she was five years old her father was posted to India with the 44th Foot Regiment. He took his wife and child with him, but within a few short weeks he died of cholera. Mrs. Gilbert was quickly befriended by a brother officer of her late husband, Lieutenant Patrick Craigie, a Scotsman, and within a short time married him.

Lola was sent back to Craigie's family in Montrose, Scotland, for her education but hated the dour, bleak, Calvinistic atmosphere of the house. She did not fit in, so her father arranged for her to stay with some friends in Bath. There she finished her education, visiting Paris in the process. She was, as I have



Lola Montez, Countess of Landsfeld, from a lithograph by Prosper-Guillaume Dartiguenave.



said, a remarkably beautiful young woman. Mother was quick to recognise this and began to look out for a suitable husband. Bath, she feared, was full of 'detrimentals'.. At any rate, she did choose a son-in-law for Lola - Sir Abraham Lumley, a Calcutta judge who was old enough to be the girl's father! Lola was quick to dub him 'that gouty old rascal' and refused to marry him. Instead, she eloped with a young lieutenant, Thomas James, and ended up in Rathbiggon, Co. Meath, where the bridegroom's brother, Rev. John James, married them. They moved to Dublin for a short time before he was posted to India but Lola was unhappy. 'He slept like a boa-constrictor and drank too much porter,' she complained. Not long afterwards she left him and India, when it was discovered that he had engaged in 'conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman' with a colleague's wife.

Lola turned up in London. She stayed for a short time in the Imperial Hotel, Covent Garden, with a Captain Lennox whom she had met on the boat from India. But before long news of her affair got back to her husband in Calcutta and he lost no time in attempting to rid himself of her. When sufficient evidence was amassed a suit for divorce was filed and a *decree a mensa et thoro* ('from bed and board') was given. From then on Lola had to fend for herself and it is from this point that her career takes off.

She met two people who were to influence her greatly, Jean Francois Montez, an extremely wealthy man, and Edward Blanchard, a hack dramatist of Drury Lane. The former supported Lola financially and regularly turns up in various places throughout her career; the latter pointed her in the direction of the theatre; and while she quickly found she had no great talent for drama, the boards attracted her so she decided to become a dancer. Incidentally, on receiving this news, her family reportedly went into mourning and issued undertakers' cards to signify that she was now dead to them!

At any rate, when Lola headed for Madrid in 1842 to learn the rudiments of Spanish dancing she set out on an odyssey which was to take her into the annals of the theatre. For more than two decades she blazed a trail through a succession of husbands, lovers, countries and theatres to win for herself an enduring place on the stage of world history.

In May, 1855, while on an American tour, she announced that she would be travelling to Australia, bringing with her a team of actors and actresses. In the following month she set out on the ten weeks' voyage on board the rather inelegantly named *Fanny Major*.

Sydney was Lola's first port of call. Her fame and notoriety preceded her.



Lola Montez in 'Lola in Bavaria'. A 'play with a purpose'.

She was billed as a 'colossal attraction'. 'Lola Montez in Bavaria' was the show, and the Victoria Theatre was packed when the curtain went up on 23rd August. The critics acclaimed her. 'I found her', said one, 'much to my surprise - to be a very simple mannered, well behaved, cigar-loving young lady'.

Lola's stay in Sydney was not helped by the ragtag and bobtail of actors and actresses she had brought with her from America. Squabbling broke out among them so she sacked those whom she thought responsible and set out for Melbourne by the next steamer. A sheriff's officer followed her on board with a debtor's warrant of arrest. Lola undressed in her cabin and challenged the officer to seize her but he left on the pilot boat without her. Her decision to leave Sydney, however, was explained to the public by her solicitors through the press:

Our Client, Madam Lola Montez, was unwise enough to engage, at enormous cost to herself, a very inferior company in California. Before starting, she made large advances to every one of them; paid their passages from America (where they

were nearly all heavily in debt) to Australia; and trusted that, in return for her immense outlay, she would at least receive efficient assistance from them. But this band of obscure performers not only loaded her with insults while they continued to live on her, but on their arrival in Sydney they one and all refused to discharge their allotted tasks.

When Madam Montez (not unnaturally irritated by such conduct) proposed, through us, to cancel their agreements on reasonable terms, they insisted on the fulfilment of the contract which they themselves had been the first to break, and made claims upon her amounting to about £12,000. This moderate demand being very properly refused by our client, they secured an order for her arrest in respect of a number of separate actions. Only one of these (a claim for £100) was lodged in time for a warrant to be issued. When, furnished with this, Mr. Brown, the sheriff's officer, appeared on board the steamer, Madam tendered him £500, which, however, he refused to accept, insisting that she should also



The hustle and bustle of Great Bourke Street, Melbourne.

settle the various other claims for which he did not have warrants. Our client refused to leave the vessel, for which refusal, we, as her solicitors, are quite willing to accept responsibility.

Having thus outwitted the Sydney lawyers, and filled up the vacancies in her company with new players, Lola reached the Victorian capital without further mishap. A picture of the city, as it was when she landed there, is given by a contemporary author:

Melbourne is splendid. Fine wide streets, finer and wider than almost any in London, stretch away for miles in every direction. At any hour of the day thousands of persons may be observed scurrying along them with true Cheapside bustle. The Melbourne youth, however, appears to be rather precocious. "I was delighted", remarked one authority, "with the Colonial young stock. The average Australian boy is a slim, olive-complexioned young rascal, fond of Cavendish, cricket, and chuck-penny, and systematically insolent of girls, policemen, and new chums.... At twelve years of age, having passed through every phase of probationary shrewdness, he is qualified to act as a full-blown bus conductor". In the purlieus of the theatres are supper-rooms (lavish of gas and free-mannered waitresses),

bum-boat shops where they sell play-bills, wheelks, oranges, cheroots, and fried fish.

But other troubles loomed. The Sydney correspondent of the *Argus* had damaged her chances of making a good impression by writing an unfavourable account of her troubles there:

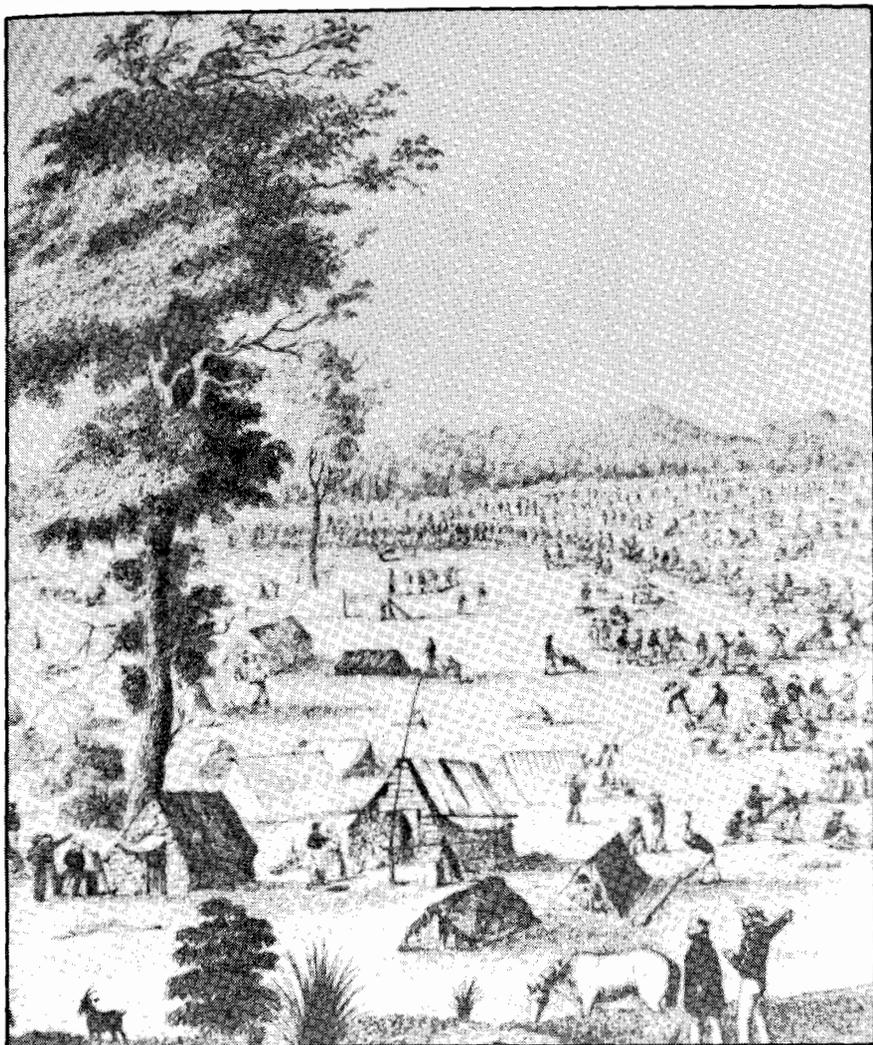
I need not tell you that the Montez has gone to Melbourne, as she will have arrived before this letter, and is not the sort of woman to keep her arrival secret. It may not, however, be so generally known that she has made what is colonially termed a 'bolt' from here.... Thinking, perhaps, that Australia was not yet a part of the civilised world, and that a company of players could not be secured here, Madame brought a set of comedians from San Francisco. They were quite useless. More competent help could have been had on the spot.

Another contemporary account of Melbourne was given by R.H. Horne, the drama critic of the *Morning Herald*:

The haunts of villainy in Sydney are not surpassed by those in Melbourne; but, with regard to drunkenness and prostitution, the latter place is far worse than Sydney. The Theatre Royal contains within itself four separate drinking-bars. The Café de Paris, in the same building, has two bars. In the theatre itself there is a drinking public every night,

especially when the house is crowded. Between every act it is the custom of the audience to rush out for a nobbler of brandy. The only exceptions are the occupants of the dress-circle, more especially when the Governor is present... The mania, for bats and balls in the boiling sun during last summer exceeded all rational excitement. The newspapers caught the epidemic, and, while scarcely noticing other far more useful games, they devoted columns upon columns to minute accounts of the matches of a hundred different clubs.

Lola opened at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, on 13th September, 1855 in her Bavarian role. When audiences began to diminish she announced that she would perform the now infamous 'Spider Dance', which she had first performed in San Francisco. In this role she appeared with hundreds of wire spiders sewn on her attenuated ballet skirts; and when any of them fell off she had to indulge in pronounced wriggles and contortions to put them back in position. Her accompanying movements were held by some to be 'daring and suggestive'. One reporter called the dance 'the most libertinish and indelicate performance that could possibly be given on the public stage. We feel compelled to denounce in terms of unassured reprobation the



The gold diggings at Ballarat, at the time of the tour of Lola Montez.

Australian society. As one writer described it:

Melbourne was both a ghost-port and a continuous saturnalia. Port Phillip Bay had become a Sargasso Sea of dead ships, rocking empty at anchor through a hundred tides and then a hundred more, bilges unpumped, their masts a bare forest. When a vessel arrived with her gold-hungry passengers and her hold crammed with mining tools and cheap furniture, the crews (and often the captains too) would desert as soon as she was unloaded, joining the thick human stream for Ballarat and Bendigo. Employers, stranded without labour, locked their offices and went on the road. "Cottages are deserted", reported the lieutenant-governor of Victoria, Charles La Trobe, in October, 1851, "there are houses to let, business is at a standstill, and even schools are closed. In some of the suburbs not a man is left, and the women are known for self-protection to forget neighbours' jars (quarrels) and to group together to keep house ... Fortunate the family, whatever its position, which retains its servants at any sacrifice, and can further secure supplies for their households from the few tradesmen that remain ... all buildings and contract works, public and private, almost without exception, are at a standstill. No contract can be insisted upon under the circumstances."

Shanty towns and bark huts proliferated to house the thousands of emigrants, frantic with hope, who poured off the ships from England and Ireland.

In the grog-shops and hotels that lined the filthy, traffic-jammed streets of the young city, where a man could sink up to his knees in mud and ordure merely by stepping off the curb, a round-the-clock orgy was conducted by "the worst-looking population eyes ever beheld"—the diggers and their hangers-on, their mates and their flushed doxies drinking the gold away. One man, who had never tasted champagne before, bought a hotel's entire stock of it and emptied every bottle into a horse trough, inviting all and sundry to suck it up. Miners lurched up and down the luxury shops, jamming huge tawdry rings on their girls' fingers, demanding the most expensive dresses, lighting their pipes with £5 notes and pouring gold dust into the cupped hands of hackney-drivers. "They are intoxicated with their suddenly-acquired wealth, and run riot in the wildness of their joy," noted an English gold-seeker, John Sherer. They were "just like so many unbroke horses caught in a desert where they never knew anything but

performance in which Madam Montez here figures.'

But Lola rounded on her critics with a sharp letter to the editor of the newspaper:

GRAND IMPERIAL HOTEL,
September, 1855.

Sir,

A criticism of my performance of the "Spider Dance" at the Theatre Royal was published in this mornings *Argus*, couched in such language that I must positively answer it.

The piety and ultra-puritanism of the *Argus* might prevent the insertion of a letter bearing my signature. Therefore, I address myself to you.

The "Spider Dance" is a national one, and is witnessed with delight by all classes in Spain, and by both sexes from Queen to peasant.

I have always looked upon this dance as a work of high art; and I reject with positive scorn the insinuation of your contemporary that I wish to pander to a morbid taste for what is improper and indelicate.

I shall be at my post to-morrow evening; and will then adopt a course

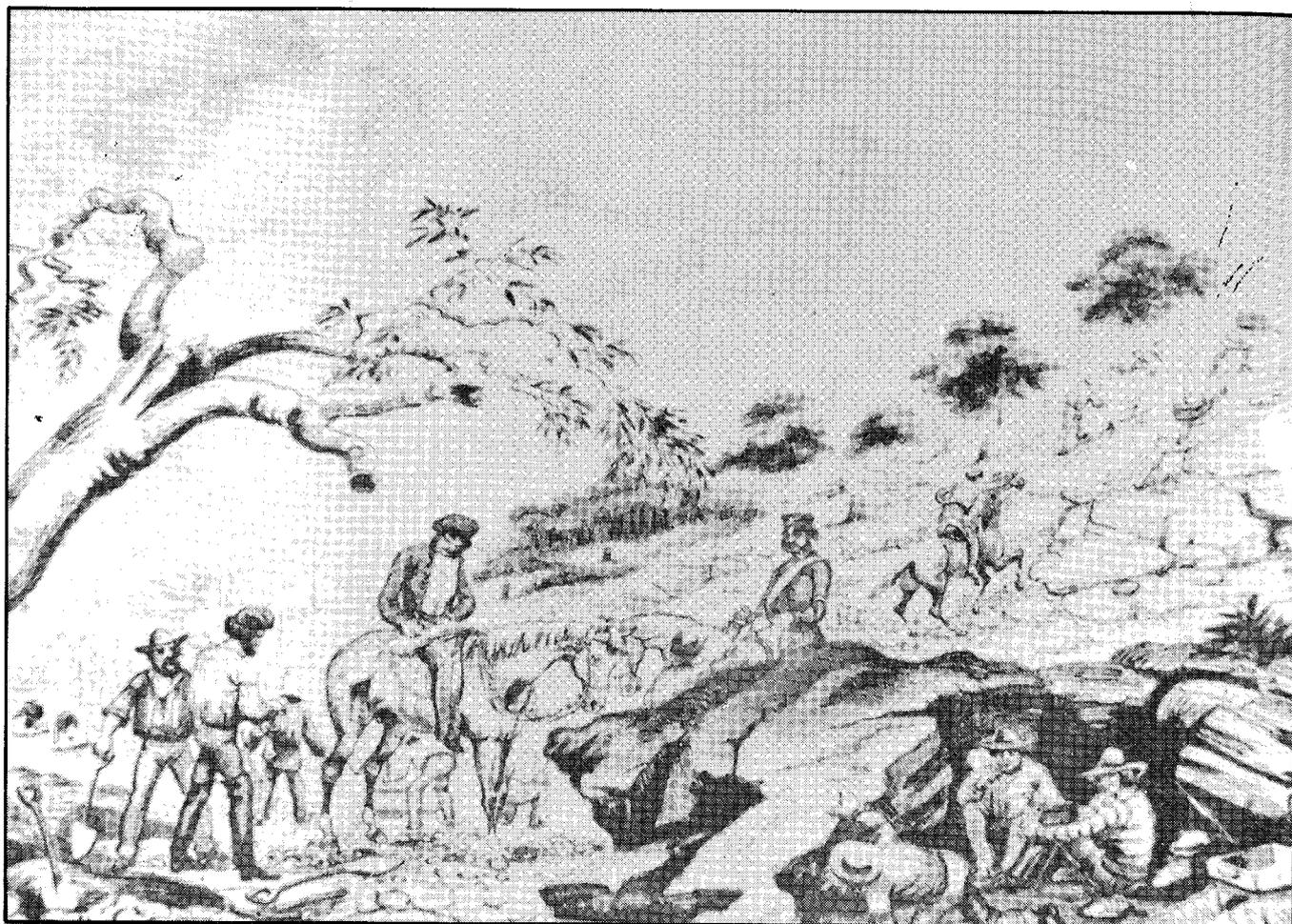
that will test the value of the opinion advanced by the *Argus*.

The course adopted was to ask the audience who had paid double the normal price for seats whether or not she should perform the dance, and the audience duly approved.

On the following morning another champion of morals attacked her for having 'outraged decency'. He applied for a summons for her arrest but found himself served with a writ for libel. Nothing more was heard of the matter.

Having sufficiently tested the moral ropes of the capital, Lola decided to leave but not before a drink was called after her, the Lola Montez Appetizer, consisting of 'Old Tom, ginger, lemon and hot water'.

The happenings in Melbourne were only the *hors d'œuvres* of what was to follow at her next stop, 75 miles away the gold-mining town of Ballarat. In 1856 this small republican town was already a legend in Australia's mining history. Five years previously gold had been discovered there by a seventy year old, John Dunlop. His discovery and that at Bathurst and Bendigo immediately changed the face of



A Ballarat goldfield, c. 1856.

hunger, and suddenly thrown into a rich paddock where they find nothing but plenty." They treated their women like crude pashas, even the ones who seemed to have few prospects, like "Biddy Carroll" fresh from Ireland: "Exceedingly stupid, lazy and dirty, poor Biddy could make no friends," and resembled "an unripe potato just dug from the soil with its jacket flying." But soon she found her digger, and soon after that an acquaintance noticed in the saloon of a steamer.

"the simple, stupid, potato-like face of Biddy Carroll...the very perfection of a lucky, thoughtless, gold-digger's bride. Her bonnet was of white satin, with a profusion of the most exquisite flowers, the whole enveloped in the folds of a rich white veil. She wore a superb lavender-coloured flowered satin dress, with a gorgeous barège shawl...a massive gold brooch...a massive gold chain, and her wrists encircled with handsome silver bracelets."

The Biddies were not just amusing objects of condescension. In their gaudy store-bought finery, they were signs of class rupture. Gold disturbed



Countess of Landsfeld. 'A favourite portrait', from the Harvard Theatre Collection.

the order of Anglo-Australian society – from pastoral "aristocrat" down to convict – with shudders of democracy.

"We be the aristocracy now," miners were heard to say as they rollicked in

the Melbourne grog-shops, "and the aristocracy now be we."

When Lola arrived in Ballarat in early 1856 things had not changed much. Yet she made her mark. The local paper heralded her arrival: "Our readers will be pleased to learn that the world-renowned Lola, a lady who has the Kings at her back, and who has caused as much upheaval in the world as Helen of Troy, is about to appear among us....Young gentlemen of Ballarat, look out for your hearts! Havoc will assuredly be played among them'.

On 16th February she was to open at the Victoria Theatre. A generous programme was offered which included a comedy entitled 'A Morning Call', a farce, 'The Spittalsfield Weaver', a domestic drama, 'Raffaello the Reprobate', and the tragedy, 'Anthony and Cleopatra'. As the repertoire was to include the 'Spider Dance' she took the precaution of sending a description of it to the **Ballarat Star**:

The Characteristic and fascinating SPIDER DANCE had been performed by MADAME LOLA MONTEZ with the utmost success throughout the United States of America and before all the Crowned Heads of Europe.

This dance, on which malice and



The 'Spider Dance'. The cause of much criticism.

envy have endeavoured to fix the stain of immorality, has been given in the other Colonies to houses crammed from floor to ceiling with rank and fashion and beauty. In Adelaide His Excellency the Governor-General, accompanied by Lady McDonnell and quite the most select ladies of the city, accorded it their patronage, while the Free and Accepted

Masons did Madame Lola Montez the distinguished honour of attending in full regalia.

The first night went well but then Lola fell foul of a critic who had disparaged her. It was horsewhip time again and Lola summarily executed vengeance on the recalcitrant editor. On the following night she attacked him verbally from the stage, rebutting his

charges that she was notorious for her immorality. 'Notorious, indeed! Why, I defy everybody here, or anywhere else, to say that I am, or ever was, immoral. It's not likely that, if I wanted to be immoral, I should be slaving away or earning my bread by hard work. What do you think?' The audience replied with resounding cheers for Lola, and three lusty groans for the editor. That was not the end of the matter, however, and on the next night Lola publicly challenged the journalist to meet with pistols. 'I challenged him to fight a duel, but the poltroon would not accept.' A number of correspondents took up the cudgels on Lola's behalf, but it was only when an action for libel was initiated that an apology was offered. An uneasy but permanent truce ensued.

A successful tour of Bendigo, Castlemaine, Sandhurst and other Victorian towns followed. There appears to have been less excitement in this latter part of the tour, except for the episode when she tried to horsewhip a theatre manager. Unfortunately for Lola, that man's wife was standing nearby, and hoisted the whip from her and then laid it across Lola's back! It took her a month to recover.

Another account given by an eye-witness is somewhat different, and it seems that again Lola met fire with fire. "At Ballarat", he said, "Lola pitched into and cross-buttocked a stalwart Amazon who had omitted to show her proper respect."

However, the encounter at Ballarat did not halt her gallop. "Her popularity," said William Kelly, an Australian squatter, "was not limited to the stage. She was welcomed with rapture on the goldfields, and all the more for the liberal fashion in which she 'shouted' when returning the hospitality of the diggers. Her pluck, too, delighted them, for she would descend the deepest shafts with as much nonchalance as if she were entering a boudoir."

She completed her tour at Bendigo. During the period she spent there 'she lived on terms of the most cordial amity with the entire populace, and without a single disturbing incident to ruffle the serenity of the intercourse', according to one journalist.

And so another chapter in her comparatively short life (1816-61) came to a close. In the autumn of 1856 she disbanded her company and decided to move back to Europe. Although this spirited daughter of Limerick was never to return there again, she had made a lasting impact on the colony and its people. No matter what else can be said about her—and much has been spoken, published and filmed—it cannot be taken away from her that she was the most exotic performer ever to prance her wayward way across the boards of Australia.