



The Taits in Limerick and Melbourne



he pattern of emigration from the Shetland Islands in Scotland has been fairly consistent over the centuries, and men and women from the islands have travelled to near and far in search of employment. The contribution of one Shetlands family – the Taits – to the history of the adopted cities in Ireland and Australia is an extraordinary one, and provides a further, though little known, link between the two countries.

Like many more from his native place before him and since, Peter Tait was an emigrant at an early age. But he was much more than that. Born in Lerwick, Scotland, in 1823, the second son of Thomas Tait, he came to Limerick in 1838, with seven shillings and six pence in his pocket. He had moved to the city to join his sister, the wife of Martin Honan, who was to become mayor of Limerick in 1842 and '43. During his thirty years in the city, Peter Tait was to show remarkable business acumen and genius, which made him Limerick's leading industrialist and mayor for three successive years, from 1866 to 1868.

In 1844 he secured employment as a shop assistant in the department store of Cumine and Mitchell. During a recession in trade, Peter Tait was laid off work, but he did not allow this misfortune to daunt him. Instead, he seized on the opportunity to show the initiative and character that was later to take him to the top of the Irish industrial world. He purchased a hawker's basket, stocked it with wares, which he sold in the city and to sailors from visiting sailing ships, many from as far away as Australia. After long months at sea, the sailors were among his best customers, as they sought shirts and other such items of clothing to wear on shore.

Tait soon realised the potential of his expanding market, and it was not long before he rented rooms at Bedford Row. He also became an employer by taking on a woman worker to make shirts. Three years later, he was advertising for 500 shirt-makers, and had moved to larger premises in William Street.

On 23rd June, 1853, Tait married Rose Abraham of Fort Prospect, Limerick, at the Independent Chapel,



A portrait of Sir Peter Tait, Mayor of Limerick, 1866-68.

by Jim Kemmy

Bedford Row. Rev. William Forbottom, who was later to prove to be a valuable political supporter of Tait in the Orkney-Shetland general election campaign, performed the ceremony. Peter Tait's new-found social status and wealth was shown when he bought South Hill House, an impressive mansion overlooking the city, and the couple took up residence there.

Limerick had long been a garrison city, and the uniforms of the officers and soldiers were hand cut and tailored to meet the requirements of the diffe-

rent regiments. Tait was one of the first people to see the wide possibilities of the newly invented Singer sewing machine to mass produce clothing. He spoke about his ideas for a cheaper, more efficient means of making uniforms to the Lord Lieutenant in Dublin, who communicated with the War Office in London. A year's trial vindicated Tait's ideas, and soon he was sanctioned as the official supplier of uniforms to the whole British Army.

Earlier, with his newly acquired workforce of 500, he had supplied shirts to the British Army in the Crimean War of 1853-1856. After the Famine years of the 1840s, wages were



low, and there was a large pool of unemployed labour to draw on. As well as the supply of shirts, he also secured a contract for military boots, but these were considered below standard. However, Tait was resourceful enough to contact an M.P. in London, and, through his intervention, the boots were re-examined and the contract reaffirmed.

By this time Tait was well on his way to becoming the largest clothing manufacturer in the world. When he moved to spacious new premises in Boherbuoy to establish the Limerick Clothing Factory, he further expanded his workforce. He also extended his manufacturing empire by becoming a director of Cannock's Department store, one of the largest in the city, where he set up a glove-making department. (In the eighteenth century Limerick gloves, made by a manufacturer named Lyons, were so fine that they could be enclosed in walnut shells, and their maker received orders from as far afield as the Court of Russia.)

By 1858 Tait had become the biggest employer in Limerick, with 1,300 workers and 150 sewing machines. By 1864 he had established himself as the largest clothing manufacturer in the British Isles.

With his slogan, 'Prosperity to the trade of Limerick', he continued to expand his operations. After the Crimean War, he secured further contracts to supply the Canadian Army and the Confederate troops in the American Civil War. To ensure safe delivery of the uniforms, he purchased three ships, the *Evelyn*, the *Elvie* and the *Kelpie*. The successful completion of a contract for 30,000 uniforms in 1863, was marked by the Limerick Congregated Trades in the form of a congratulatory address, presented to him at a banquet held in his Boherbuoy factory, which was attended by 140 guests. In making this presentation, the Congregated Trades were merely reflecting the goodwill and esteem for Tait among the citizens of Limerick, particularly among the workers. He had become the idol of the girls, many of them from poor, deprived backgrounds, who made up the vast majority of his workforce.

Early in 1864, he made a determined effort to revive flax spinning in Limerick, and inaugurated its manufacture at a public dinner in January.

When he was at the peak of his popularity, Tait surprised many people by announcing, in March, 1865, that he was moving to London to take up residence there. For some time before he had been considering plans to invest heavily in the clothing industry in Leeds and London, though he still maintained South Hill House and returned to Limerick on a regular basis.

Before his departure from Limerick,

he had entered politics and had been elected alderman for the Castle Ward. He was also honoured at this time when a committee, comprising the main business people in the city, was set up with the object of erecting the Tait Testimonial in Baker Place, as a monument to all he had achieved for the people of Limerick. Tait's Clock was

tile classes of county and city, the officers of her Majesty's Engineers, of the 73rd Highland Regiment, of her Majesty's iron clad ship *Prince Consort*, of the Artillery, etc., etc. The hall was a scene of dazzling splendour; the decorations were in excellent taste. On the following night the ball given by the Mayor and Mrs. Tait,



The slogan, 'Prosperity to the trade of Limerick', on Tait's tokens.

duly built in the middle of the thoroughfare, in front of the Dominican Church.

Tait returned to Limerick in September, 1865, to mark the safe return of his ship the *Evelyn*, which had run the blockade five times, after leaving Foynes, Co. Limerick, on the previous October with a cargo of uniforms for the Confederate Army.

In 1866 Tait was further honoured when he was elected Mayor of Limerick, and he celebrated the occasion by holding a banquet. Maurice Lenihan, in his *History of Limerick*, described the occasion:

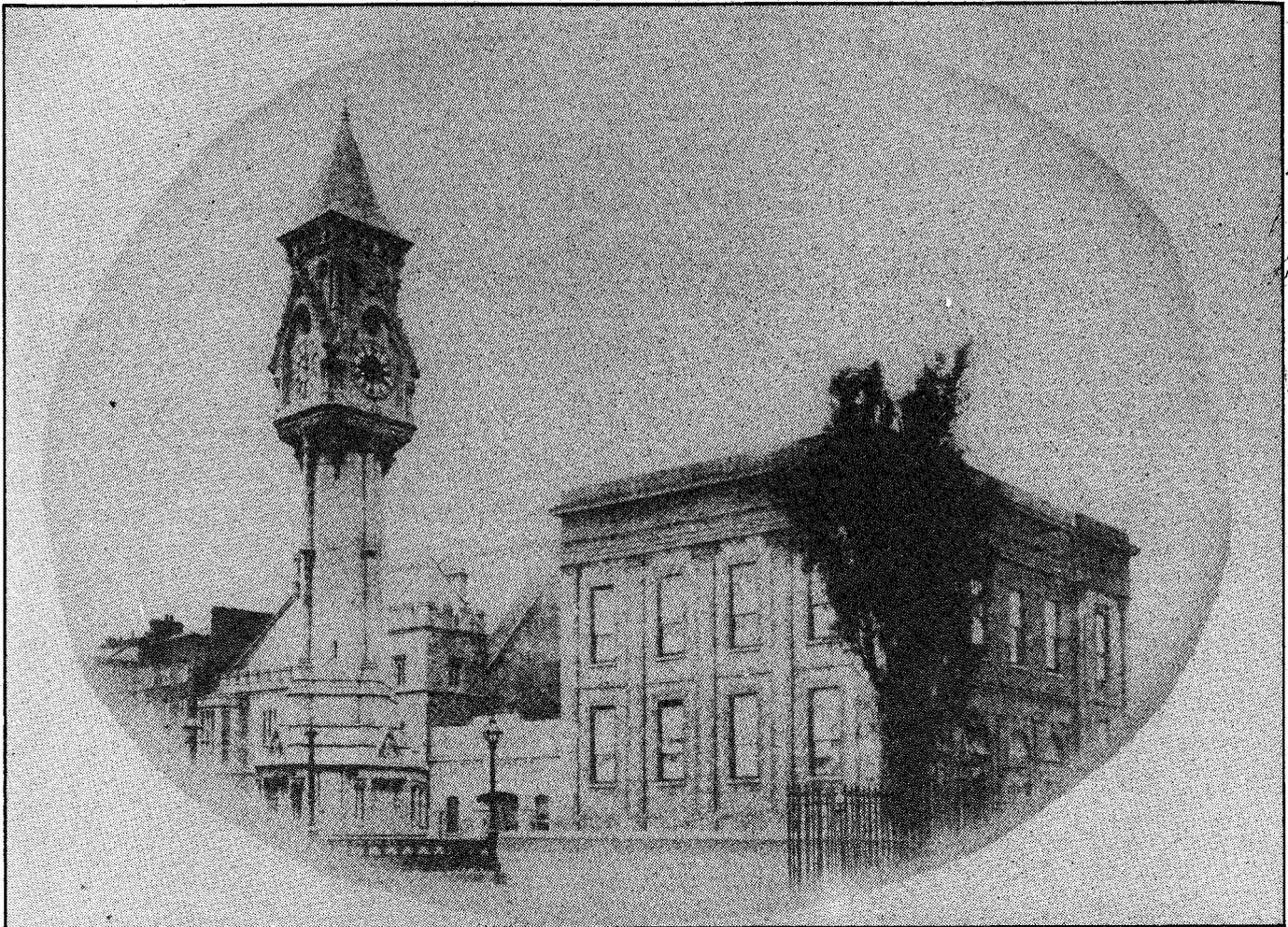
Alderman Tait, the proprietor of the great Army Clothing Factory, and Mayor of Limerick for 1866, inaugurated his mayoralty by a very sumptuous banquet, followed by one of the most numerously attended balls ever given in Limerick. The banquet, which took place at New Hall, Prospect Hill, on Thursday night, the 18th of January, 1866, was attended by nearly four hundred persons, comprising the members of the Corporation, the Catholic bishop of the diocese, the head of the Presbyterian congregation in Limerick, the county and city members, a large number of the gentry, professional and mercan-

took place, and was attended by about 1,300 of the nobility, gentry, citizens, etc.

In February, 1868, Tait was knighted for his 'inventive genius and industrial acumen'. In the same year he stood as a Tory candidate in the general election against the Liberal Major candidates George Gavin and Francis William Russell.

In the *Crescent Centenary Record*, 1959, Francis Finegan described the events leading up to the election:

*... he was certain of plenty of vocal support and assistance of other kinds that never failed in the days of the open ballot. His colleague in opposition to the Liberals was one Richard Pigott, a former editor of a Fenian newspaper, **The Irishman**. Tait and Pigott were an ill-assorted pair: Scots Presbyterian Tory and Irish Catholic Fenian. Both were as warmly supported by the local Orange newspaper, the **Limerick Chronicle**, as they were roundly denounced by the **Munster News** and the **Limerick Reporter**. In his election campaign, Tait showed himself a doughty and unscrupulous fighter. He hired, once more, the services of Michael Hogan, self-styled Bard of Thomond, who wrote a series of libellous ballads and*



Tait's Clock, Baker Place, Limerick ... 'a monument to all he had achieved for the people of Limerick'.

broadsheets on his political opponents and their supporters. Hogan had already written in support of Tait when the latter went forward for the mayoralty in 1866:

MacDonnell we'll refuse
Says the Shan Van Vocht
And a good and true man choose
Says the Shan Van Vocht,
'Tis the noble Peter Tait
That deserves the honoured seat,
And, by Jove, he won't be beat,
Says the Shan Van Vocht.

Ye fair daughters of our town
Says the Shan Van Vocht,
Who love a handsome gown,
Says the Shan Van Vocht,
Will ye be in the van
For the enterprising man
Who has put your dresses on?
Says the Shan Van Vocht.

Oh, there is not, since the flood,
Says the Shan Van Vocht,
Such a man for doing good,
Says the Shan Van Vocht;
Sure he got from England's sons
A fine contract for the nuns,
And 'tis worth a thousand pounds,
Says the Shan Van Vocht.

The last verse refers to the fillip Tait gave to the lace industry then, as now, carried on in one of the convents of Limerick. Francis Finegan continues the story:

The 1868 election was, probably, one of the most disorderly ever witnessed in the city. One man lost his life in the riots between the political supporters of the Liberals and Tait-cum-Pigott. The wonder is that casualties were not greater. The Liberal candidates were elected with 1,026 votes for Gavin and 794 for Russell. But the popularity of Tait may be recognised from the fact that he came a close third to Russell with 720 votes. The Fenian candidate secured 187. It is certain that, if Pigott had not gone forward, his votes would have been cast for Tait and have sent him to the House of Commons instead of Russell. Tait and Pigott immediately entered a plea that the Liberals won by wholesale bribery and corruption. Lord Justice Fitzgerald was appointed to preside at the ensuing enquiry which after a lengthy examination of the evidence on both sides declared the Liberals duly elected. The findings of the court indicated that if the

Liberals were in the wrong, the opposing candidates were no less so themselves.

During the election, one of Tait's employees, a man named Hill, was killed in one of the clashes between rival supporters, when a mob surrounded the Tait memorial in Baker Place.

The political issue of the day was the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Protestant Episcopal Church, but in Limerick more personal issues dominated. Tait's defeat coincided with a decline and a collapse of his shipping interests. He also became involved in a bitter public row in the city. Francis Finegan has given the background to this dispute:

... the story of his memorial medallion in the civic chain should be told. A public meeting of the citizens was held on St. Stephen's Day, when the following resolution was passed: "We, on the part of the burgesses, beg respectfully to bring under your notice the following resolution which was passed unanimously at a public meeting convened at the City Court House by the (acting) Mayor on Sunday last, 26/XII/68: 'That we indignantly protest against the conduct of



Sir Peter Tait in tampering with the civic chain of our time-honoured city and we call on the Corporation to replace at once the links of our most respected Mayors in that position from which they were so unwarrantably removed by the Champion of Tory Ascendancy." This address of the citizens was read at a Council meeting of the Corporation on New Year's Day, 1869. Peter Tait, had for some time past been maturing plans to invest heavily in industry placed in Leeds and London, but desired to be remembered in Limerick by adding a large medallion to the chain of the city where he had filled the mayoralty for three terms. A resolution of the Corporation then notified Tait that a medallion was inserted only for some remarkable corporate event, as for instance, the formation of the Reformed Corporation of 1840, and he was now asked to present, in place of the medallion, one or three rings of the same pattern as those affixed by all the former mayors. Tait refused to consider the proposal and the city treasurer returned the medallion to him. Two further attempts were made by the City Fathers to have Tait reconsider his decision but he refused to have any other memorial to his mayoralty inserted in the civic chain. Whatever Tait's political views, it is certain he had no interest in the maintenance of the Protestant Episcopal Establishment in the country of his temporary adoption. And we can be certain that his medallion would still grace the civic chain, were it not for his disastrous intrusion into politics in 1868. He was a good man according to his lights, his charity was practical and he brought hope, comfort and dignity into hundreds of working-class homes in Limerick.

Tait was also dogged by a scandal involving his brother who worked with him in Limerick. Ellen Hinchey was employed as a nursery maid at South Hill House. According to a contemporary account, 'Hinchey became rather intimate with Tait's brother, which led to the birth of a child'. The affair became a *cause celebre* in Limerick, and was exploited by Tait's political opponents to cause him the maximum damage. After an investigation into the affair, held at the Limerick Lunatic Asylum on 4th February, 1868, the **Limerick Chronicle** commented: 'The mayor provided her with money and had the child sent to a convent to be brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. He gave the girl an allowance of £1 per week, at the same time placing her in a position in London to enable her to have access to the child whenever she desired. Next she was sent to New York ...' The story of Ellen Hinchey, her child and the Tait's is a long and painful one, and was fully

reported in the Limerick newspapers of the day.

After his three year term as Mayor, Peter Tait gradually withdrew from Limerick. His business further declined, and his driving energies were badly missed at the Limerick Clothing Factory. The closure of the factory – it was



Poster announcing the film 'The Story of the Kelly Gang', November, 1906.

later to be re-opened under new management – on 16th November, 1875, marked the end of the Tait era in Limerick.

Little more was heard about him until his death at the Hotel de France, in Batoum in Russia on 11th December, 1890. He had gone there in pursuit of another new business venture: he had been trying to establish a turkish cigarette factory in Salonica. He died almost penniless. He bequeathed his books, plate, furniture and linen etc. to his wife Rose. He had no house to pass on, and he left only £50.

This was, in every sense of the phrase, a 'rags-to-riches' – and back

almost to rags again – story with a difference. It must be said of Peter Tait that he kept trying to the end. His name is still fondly remembered in Limerick, and Tait's Clock still tells the time and tolls out it chimes to the city's citizens.

The Australian Tait's

The story of the Australian Tait's begins in 1862 on a windjammer during a five-month voyage from England. John Turnbull Tait, a cousin of Peter Tait, left his family's farm at 'Berrie', at Scalloway in the Shetland Islands, to start a new life in Australia. He left his native Tingwell at the age of thirty-three, and settled in Castlemaine, where he had relatives and friends from Scotland, and it was there that he met and married Ann Sarah Leeming, who had left her London home to join a cousin in Australia.

They had five sons – William, Charles, John Henry, James Nevin, Edward Joseph – and three daughters – Catherine (who died in infancy), Helen Elizabeth and Harriet Amy – were born to John Tait and his wife during their years in Castlemaine.

Frank Samuel Tait was born in Richmond in 1883, after the family had moved to Melbourne, where the elder son, William, was already working at the Richmond Post Office. Supporting his increasing family was a continual struggle for John Tait, and for a time he went looking for gold, but found little. He later worked as a mercer in a Castlemaine tailoring firm, and may have secured this job through Sir Peter's influence, though he never achieved the success of his cousin.

In Castlemaine, the Tait children led a simple, country life, attending school, and Charlie, even then a born organiser, arranged the chairs for his Sunday school class. It was here that he saw for the first time the 'one night' theatrical touring companies, and he was never to forget the vivid impressions these colourful players left on him. From these early days he grasped the message that a person could get on in the world by providing entertainment for the public.

The older Tait children went to the State School in Castlemaine, and, after the move to Melbourne, Ted and Frank attended Richmond State School at the corner of Punt and Bridge roads. Later the family was able to send Frank, the youngest son, to Melbourne Grammer School.

Charlie, not unexpectedly, was to be the first showman in the family, and later, when the Tait's had moved to Melbourne, he heard the great singers of the day, while attending to his 'side duties' of ushering patrons to their seats at the popular Saturday night



concerts at the Exhibition Buildings in the Carlton Gardens. This was his first experience in show business, but already he was enlisting the services of his brothers in carrying out minor duties.

Like his cousin, Sir Peter Tait, Frank Tait was knighted in 1956. In her book **A Family of Brothers**, his widow, Lady Tait, tells how Charlie made his breakthrough into show business:

Charlie's first job was as a printer's devil in Castlemaine, a job which ended when he dropped a frame of a carefully set-up job, scattering the handset type in all directions! After the family moved to Richmond he had two further jobs: first taking orders for a photographer and then as a messenger for a tailor in the Eastern Arcade. His next and last job was his stepping stone to success. He saw an advertisement for a messenger boy at Allan's Music Warehouse. Standing outside waiting to be interviewed another applicant snatched Charlie's cap and threw it inside the doorway. As Charlie rushed forward to pick it up he bumped into Mr. George Allan, Snr., who asked him if he wanted the job. He quickly replied that he did and the job was his.

Ted Tait describes this incident and the brothers' early beginnings in his diary:

'Charlie walked out of his employment in the Eastern Arcade in April 1884. He walked down Collins Street, and saw a card in the window of Allan's Music Warehouse:

Boy wanted 5/- a week

He saw the manager and the job was his. He saved his pennies and employed his brothers at concerts at the Town Hall, Athenaeum Hall and Exhibition. He then saved their pennies and shillings and from that humble start he founded Tait Brothers Concert Bureau which led to E.J. Tait joining J.C. Williamson's on 7th July, 1900, and the theatrical control of J.C. Williamson's by J.H. Tait, J. Nevin Tait, E.J. Tait and F.S. Tait on 3rd July, 1920.'

Lady Tait concludes this first chapter of her book with the words: 'Truly from small beginnings do large concerns grow!' From this modest start, and showing the same entrepreneurial flair as their cousin, the Tait brothers went on to become the leading theatrical impresarios in Australia. They also went on to make film history.

In their book, **Australian Film 1900-1977**, Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper tell the story:

The longest narrative film then seen in Australia, and quite possibly in the world, opened on 26th December, 1906, at the Athenaeum Hall, Melbourne. In 1904, two young entrepreneurs, John and Nevin Tait, from a



After his execution, Ned Kelly became the subject of ballads, books, plays and eventually films. This is a still from the first feature film about him, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, made by the Tait Brothers in 1906. Here Kelly shoots Constable Fitzpatrick.

family of five brothers in show business, had begun to include film programmes among their concert bookings at the Athenaeum Hall. Their screenings of imported 'scenics' had been profitable, and they became eager to expand their film activities. In making their first film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, they were joined by Millard Johnson and William Gibson, two chemists who had become interested in film when they acquired a second-hand projector from a vaudeville show.

The film was financed jointly by the two partnerships, and after thorough planning, was directed by the Tait's older brother, Charles, who had had wider experience in theatrical presentations. The chief location was the family estate of Charles Tait's wife, Elizabeth, at Heidelberg on the outskirts of Melbourne. The Tait family provided enthusiastic support, both in the cast and behind the camera. Elizabeth appeared as Kate Kelly, and all of the Tait brothers and Charles Tait's children took part in crowd scenes. A local circus provided some fifty horses and a team of roughriders. An actor hired to play Ned Kelly deserted the production after a few scenes had been shot, and to avoid reshooting, various understudies appeared in his place, on horseback or wearing armour, so that his

face was never seen. One of the dramatic highlights – the bushrangers' attempt to derail a train-load of police – was staged with the help of the Victorian Railways Commissioners, who provided a train as well as a team of gangers to tear up the track. This gesture of support from the government tells much about the Tait's infectious enthusiasm and powers of persuasion, for government authorities were later notorious for their obstruction to any film-making proposal that involved public utilities. Interiors, including the Glenrowan hotel, were staged in the back yard of Charles Tait's home in Melbourne, using sunlight as the sole light source. Tinting was applied for dramatic effect throughout the film, for example with a red glow for the scene in which Ned's armour was made by a blacksmith.

At the time the Tait's were unaware of the historical importance of the film, and only much later, when film production was more established, did their work appear in perspective as a significant pioneering feat. The Tait brothers, Gibson and others poured forth their memories of the event but the passage of time and the desire to make a good story of it created a maze of contradictory information. It is possible, for example, that Elizabeth Tait did not play Kate



Kate Kelly holds the trooper at bay. Mrs. Elizabeth Tait, wife of Charles Tait, played the part of Kate in what was destined to become the world's first full-length feature film.

Kelly throughout the film but merely doubled for another actress in the horse-riding scenes, since Elizabeth was an expert horsewoman. Estimates of the production cost also varied widely: John Tait claimed that the total cost rose to just over £1,000; Gibson spoke of £400, but it is possible that he was referring only to his share of the total. The confusion was not helped by the Tait's decision to improve and extend the film, so that its length and its content continually varied. It was advertised as 4,000 feet in length at the original Melbourne season, but in February, 1907, when it opened in Sydney at the Palace Theatre, it already boasted at least one new scene, exclusive to New South Wales, depicting the Kellys' raid on a bank at Jerilderie. When re-released in 1910, it again carried new scenes shot by Orrie and Reg Perry.

The film's capacity to stir its audience was reflected in its extraordinary attendance records. For five weeks it ran to full houses at the Athenaeum Hall (transferring occasionally to the larger Town Hall nearby when it was available) and then moved to other Melbourne theatres. At the same time it was screened in Sydney and Adelaide, and reports of its success soon drew a young Queensland entrepreneur, E.J. Carroll, to Melbourne to purchase the Queensland rights; Carroll proceeded to make his fortune by touring with the film around the state, and he remained involved in film exhibition and occasionally produc-

tion from that time on. Gibson later claimed that the film had returned no less than £25,000 to the producers, which he regarded as a record percentage profit for any Australian production.

The Tait's approached the marketing of the film with the same efficiency that marked the production. Before its Athenaeum release it was tried out in several country towns and was probably re-edited according to audience reaction. A biograph company was employed by the Tait's to tour with the film around Australia, controlling publicity, accounts and the elaborate stage presentation that accompanied each screening. As the film unwound, an orchestra provided music, and an actor (sometimes two) provided voices and a description of the actions, and young boys were employed to provide sound effects behind the screen. Sometimes effects were delivered with more vigour than taste, and the distracted *Bulletin* reviewer complained that 'there is a deal too much racket in connection with the show - sometimes you can't see the pictures for the noise of horses, trains, gunshots, and wild cries'. By September, 1907, it was screening in New Zealand, and had reached England, where it toured as 'the longest film ever made'. In all of its screenings the film was presented with a programme of curtainraisers - scenics, comedy items and news topics - while intervals during the screening of the feature, as reels were being changed, were filled with

songs by one of the actors on stage.

The bushranging genre on the screen habitually attracted the attention of the censors, and the Tait's experience in 1907 did not augur well for the future: in April the Victorian Chief Secretary banned screenings of the film in Kelly's own territory, around Benalla and Wangaratta in the central north of the state, partly for fear of public disorder and rioting, and partly because of representations to the police from relatives and friends of the Kelly family, who feared that their names would be hurt by a renewal of the family scandal. In April, 1912, the Victorian government went further, and prevented the screening of a revised version of the film throughout the state.

Buoyed by the continuing profitability of the film, J. and N. Tait and Johnson and Gibson eventually merged their interests in March, 1911, in a company, Amalgamated Pictures, and continued to produce films on a modest scale until they joined the combine of Australasian Films in 1912. Their main interest, however, was exhibition, and neither party had a deep commitment to production.

The Tait's did not maintain their interest in film and eventually severed their connection with Amalgamated to focus on theatrical activity. All five brothers (Charles, John, Nevin, E.J. and Frank) became powerful entrepreneurial figures in Australian theatre, with a dominant position in the J.C. Williamson empire after 1920.

Today, only fragments of the film *The Story of the Kelly Gang* remain. Despite its age, the film is well preserved, and is well worth seeing. To mark the publication of this special Limerick Australia edition of the *Old Limerick Journal* and the opening of an Irish Australia exhibition at the Limerick Museum, a copy of the film is being shown for the duration of the exhibition, thus renewing the long Tait connection with the city.

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