

Mark Mackereth

By Stephen Boshoff

Alfred Mark Mackereth was born on Christmas day 1907 in the parish of Sinnington, sub-district Pickering), Normandy, Yorkshire. The 1911 England and Wales Census database indicate Mark lived in the household of his grandfather, Mark Mackereth (aged 63), together with Mark senior's wife Ann (aged 61), their daughter and Alfred Mark's mother Sarah Mackereth (aged 27), and two other grandchildren of Mark senior, John William Mackereth (aged 15), and Ernest Mackereth (aged 10). Mark senior's occupation was listed as farm labourer, and Sarah as "general servant domestic". Her marital status was given as single.¹ Sarah had an older and younger sister, Margaret Hannah, and Emily, and two younger brothers, James, and David.²

It is on a farm – presumed to be where the family lived and his grandfather worked – where Mark learnt to fish for trout and salmon. While the household wanted him to become a farmer, he decided to follow a musical career. He studied the double bass under George Martin, principal double bass player in the Hallé Orchestra and at the Royal Military School of Music under Claude Hobday. The Hallé gave its first concert on 30th January 1858 under the baton of its founder Sir Charles Hallé. Until his death in 1895, Sir Charles conducted almost every concert and performed as piano soloist at many. Under the guidance of such distinguished conductors as Hans Richter, Sir Hamilton Harty, and Sir John Barbirolli, the Orchestra continued to thrive and develop. For most of its history, the Hallé's home in Manchester was the Free Trade Hall, bombed in the Manchester Blitz. The Hallé exists to this day. Claude Hobday played in many leading orchestras, including the Royal English Opera under Sir Arthur Sullivan, the London Symphony Orchestra as a founding member, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and as a founder member of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1930. He was also a prolific recording artist.

While a member of the Regimental Band of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, WWII broke out, disrupting Mackereth's musical career. He experienced evacuation from Dunkirk in 1940 and was mentioned twice in dispatches. He reportedly said that when he woke up after his first night back in London "his hair had turned white." He returned to active service in France during the Normandy campaign.³

¹ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X7PV-PZX> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

² <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:7RVK-LN2> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

³ See Geoff Godley's article on Mackereth in *Piscator* No. 123 July 1991.

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It is assumed that Mackereth was part of the 1st Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, who started their retreat to Dunkirk from Belgium on 17 May 1940. Marching day and night over long distances, "... the whole retreat was made under nerve-racking conditions of a crumbling front with all the terrible congestion and confusion caused by pitiable sight of refugees. Troops were also often under shell-fire and the target of dive-bombers..." They reached the perimeter of Dunkirk on 30 May 1940. On the 31st they marched the last 9 miles to the port where they waited four hours under heavy bombing before nine officers and 320 NCOs and other ranks embarked the HMS Worcester and the steamer Maid of Orleans (the original infantry battalion would have comprised about 800 men).

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Mark met his wife Eileen Lilian Watkins – a South African – while on guard duty at the Tower of London. It is not clear when this was. The Tower was damaged by German bombers between September and October 1940. Long a place of imprisonment and execution, Rudolph Hess, deputy Führer of the Nazi party, was imprisoned here in 1941, and in the same year, Josef Jakobs was the last spy to be executed at the Tower during WWII.

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Geoff Godley, in *Piscator* No. 123 July 1991 states that Mark and Eileen came to South Africa in 1951, when Mark was offered a position with the SABC National Orchestra in Johannesburg. This cannot be correct, as the SABC Symphony Orchestra – or National Orchestra – has its origins in its three studio ensembles in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town and the Municipal Orchestra of the Johannesburg City Council. When the SABC centralised its broadcasting in Johannesburg, the future of the three ensembles were in doubt. At the same time, the Municipal Orchestra of the Johannesburg City Council had been disbanded. Thus, the SABC was able to form an orchestra of 80 musicians from these groupings in 1954. While it's main base was at the Johannesburg City Hall, it would tour the country.⁴ Mark was probably a member of the SABC Johannesburg ensemble before incorporation as

⁴ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SABC> and <https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/28254/dissertation.pdf?sequence=1> (both accessed on 24 December 2022). A little of Stellenbosch – home of the Eerste and the Jonkershoek hatchery – enters the SABC National Orchestra. Gideon Daniel Roos, matriculated in Stellenbosch, where his father – the first Springbok rugby captain – was head of the Hoër Jongenskool, today's Paul Roos Gymnasium. Gideon Daniel became Director-General of the SABC in 1948, and the formation of the National Orchestra is attributed to his foresight and efforts.

part of the National Orchestra. As a member of the National Orchestra, he must have performed under conductors Edgar Cree and Anton Hartman.

Mark married Eileen Lillian Watkins on 29 November 1952 at St Martin's-in-the-Veld, Johannesburg. On the marriage certificate, Mark's status was given as bachelor and his profession as musician, Eileen as a spinster and secretary. Their address was given as 33 Thirteenth Street, Sydenham, Johannesburg. Signing as witnesses were H.R. Schlimmer and G. Sengelmann.⁵

Mark and Eileen must have returned to England after a stint in Johannesburg. Outgoing passenger lists from the United Kingdom indicate that they emigrated to Cape Town in 1960, departing from Southampton on 8 December on board the *Windsor Castle*. Their address prior to departure was given as 4 Dean Drive, Stanmore, Middlesex.⁶ Their coming to Cape Town was because of Mark taking up the role of alternate principal bass player in the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra, the first professional orchestra in South Africa.⁷ The orchestra was under musical Directorship of David Thibault. Controversially – and without having been able to verify whether Mark played in the performance – the orchestra gave a concert in aid of the Treason Trial Fund during 1961. Despite government threatening to withdraw the orchestra's subsidy, and a teargas bomb being found in the stalls, the performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor Op. 30 went ahead. Soon after, in 1962, and perhaps again with Mark taking part, the orchestra performed Apollon musagète and Scherzo Fantastique, Op. 3 under the baton of Ivor Stravinsky. Upon his arrival in Cape Town, Mark joined the CPS. He became a member of the society's General Committee in 1964, a position he occupied until his death.

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Life as a professional musician in the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra was not easy. The orchestra – like so many others – always faced financial difficulties. In her history of the Cape Town Orchestra, Gollom states: "Notwithstanding its artistic accomplishments, the single unifying factor throughout the Orchestra's history was lack of finance. From the time it was formed in 1914, a continuous battle to survive on a financial level had taken place. Although it received a grant from the Municipal Council, with no help from the provincial Government at

⁵ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSJY-YV2R?cc=2821281&personUrl=%2Fark%3A%2F61903%2F1%3A1%3A6ZHR-2NX7> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

⁶ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:6856-BLD3> (accessed on 24 December 2022).

⁷ It became the Cape Symphony Orchestra in 1969.

any time in its history, the Orchestra's survival was under continuous threat.”⁸ Reflecting on the sixtieth anniversary of the orchestra in 1974 she observes “... that the Orchestra had managed to survive sixty years under a great deal of financial strain was a tremendous achievement. This fact was strongly emphasized in a number of articles, written especially for the sixtieth anniversary. Although much attention had been focused on Moni [Business Manager of the orchestra] and his achievements, little had been given to the working conditions and salaries of the Orchestra members. Reporters took the opportunity to draw attention to the difficulties the Orchestra members faced. An article, entitled The Orchestra's grievances, pointed out that the musicians had no professional security. Each Orchestra member had a yearly contract with the City Council, who could terminate the contract without stating a reason. Because of this insecurity, musicians frequently left the Orchestra to find more secure employment. The Orchestra members also had to pay for the maintenance of their instruments. The insecurity lowered the morale of the players, but sufficient funds were not available to rectify the situation immediately.”⁹

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Insisting on using dry flies, Mark's first day on the Smalblaar – described in his article “A newcomer to the Smalblaar” in *Piscator* No. 53 Summer 1961/ 62 – was a blank. On his next trip though, he had “a bag of fine trout”, caught on a dry Wickham's Fancy, one of his favorite flies on the Yorkshire streams. He became a master of this clear stream presenting his own versions of the Wickhams, and later the Mackereth Caribou Spider with a Pezon et Michel bamboo rod. Those who knew him described him as quiet, restful to be with, an excellent cook, and sharing on-stream. Animals were attracted to him, including Jane, the bull terrier who followed him fishing, belonging to Barry and Helga Steyn who managed the Du Toit's Kloof hotel at the time. Mackereth, according to Tom Sutcliffe, always had the same lunch on-stream, Heinz potato salad and gammon from a tin. They used to have lunch under the trees above beat 2. Tom also recalls that Mark used to put his flies in the washing machine with clothes to roughen them up a little. Many a time, when Tom fetched Mark for a day's fishing (Mark did not own a car or drove), they waited on the balcony of the Mackereth's Tamboerskloof flat for the flies to dry in the sun before their departure for the Kloofs.

⁸ Gollom, Ingrid (2000). *The History of the Cape Town Orchestra: 1914-1997*.
https://open.uct.ac.za/bitstream/handle/11427/7846/thesis_hum_2001_gollom_i.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed on 25 December 2022).

⁹ Gollom, Ingrid (2000). *The History of the Cape Town Orchestra: 1914-1997*.
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Mark died in Observatory (Groote Schuur Hospital), Cape Town on 25 January 1976 following prolonged illness. His death notice, completed on 28 January 1976, shows his father's name as Mackereth, with a question mark where his first name should be. His mother's name is indicated as Susan Ward (formerly Mackereth). His occupation is given as "retired professional musician". The notice is signed by Eileen, with their address given as 306, Leeukop, Gilmour Road, Tamboerskloof. In his will and testament, Mark left his Greener shotgun and case to his friend Geoff Adams – upon him paying the amount of R195 into his estate – and the rest to Eileen. The distribution account in Mark's estate – managed by CPS Vice-president Geoff Godley – indicated that Eileen received an Omega watch worth R20, fishing tackle worth R150, and cash to the value of R339.95.¹⁰ Mark's ashes were scattered on the Smalblaar by Geoff Godley, Brian Key, and Bob Watkins (his brother-in-law). According to Tom Sutcliffe, Mark's Pezon et Michel eventually went to Brian Key.

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I wonder whether at times during the war, A.C. Harrison, Mark Mackereth and their friends in the trenches – perhaps inspired by them coming across promising water as they moved around Europe – spoke about the trout back home. In Harrison's case, those in the Cape Kloofs, or even the feisty galjoen off the rocks at Cape Point.

Some fished during war. There is the story of Private John Henry Hirst – a English match angler – who nearing the summer of 1915, along the Western Front, and "with other British soldiers braced for impact from a German artillery barrage ... beyond the trenches in no man's land, hunkered down, casting into a front-line lake."¹¹ His rod was peculiar, 17-foot-long, made of bamboo and resembling a radio antenna that was dubbed the "spider-web." The unique design gave him the extra length he believed necessary to catch fish. It is said that when he joined the army, they soon discovered his talents and excused him from all other duties to focus on providing fish for his unit. He caught plenty trout, eel, and bream in the rivers, canals, and ponds of the Somme and around Ypres in Belgium while under mortar attacks and gunfire from the Germans.

Piscator carried few reports of the war, or fishing while on war duty. An exception is an article carried in Vol. 1 No. 3 September 1947 by J. Galbraith, "With Brown Trout in Italy",

¹⁰ <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L9FC-2QVD?i=537&cc=4319131> (accessed on 23 December 2022).

¹¹ <https://freerangeamerican.us/spider-web-fishing-rod/> (accessed on 21 December 2022).

writing about the time South Africans were stationed in Southern Italy near Bari. With their thoughts often turned to the streams of the Cape, they saw opportunity in the river Volturno where the locals told them that “there were trout, but the ‘Tedeschi’ (Germans) have bomba – and now no trout.” Galbraith and his companions had one professionally tied fly – a Teal and Yellow – kept in reserve for when they were to find a real trout stream and prospected with flies with bronze tinted feathers sourced from local chickens, black sock wool as body, and a thin strip of their red shoulder tabs as tail, coming up with a Zulu-type fly. They eventually found a fishable stream in an isolated valley near Gallo and Letino. Galbraith landed a four-inch brown on the Teal and Yellow. After significant rains improved stream conditions, they caught plenty trout up to $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. and one of a pound on the Teal and Yellow.

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Finally, thinking of Maclean, Harrison, and Mackereth, it is striking how they shared a humble, materially poor upbringing, full of uncertainty. Maclean did become successful as a shipping agent and “go-to” implementer and friend of influential investors and entrepreneurs who benefitted from the Cape and broader land’s riches. Harrison and Mackereth, however, were plagued by limited access to finances through-out their lives. One thing is certain to me; they cannot be described as “elitist”. In some ways their lives were ordinary and simple, but their love of trout and related contributions, were neither simple nor elitist.

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

As the processes of earth
strip off the colour of the skin:
take the brown hair and blue eye

and leave me simpler than at birth,
when hairless I came howling in
as the moon entered the cold sky.

Of my skeleton perhaps,
so stripped, a learned man will say
"He was of such a type and intelligence," no more.

Thus when in a year collapse
particular memories, you may
deduce, from the long pain I bore

the opinions I held, who was my foe
and what I left, even my appearance
but incidents will be no guide.

Time's wrong-way telescope will show
a minute man ten years hence
and by distance simplified.

Through that lens see if I seem
substance or nothing: of the world
deserving mention or charitable oblivion,

not by momentary spleen
or love into decision hurled,
leisurely arrive at an opinion.

Remember me when I am dead
and simplify me when I'm dead.

- *Keith Douglas*¹²

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¹² "Simplify Me When I'm Dead". <https://allpoetry.com/Keith-Douglas> (accessed on 24 December 2022).