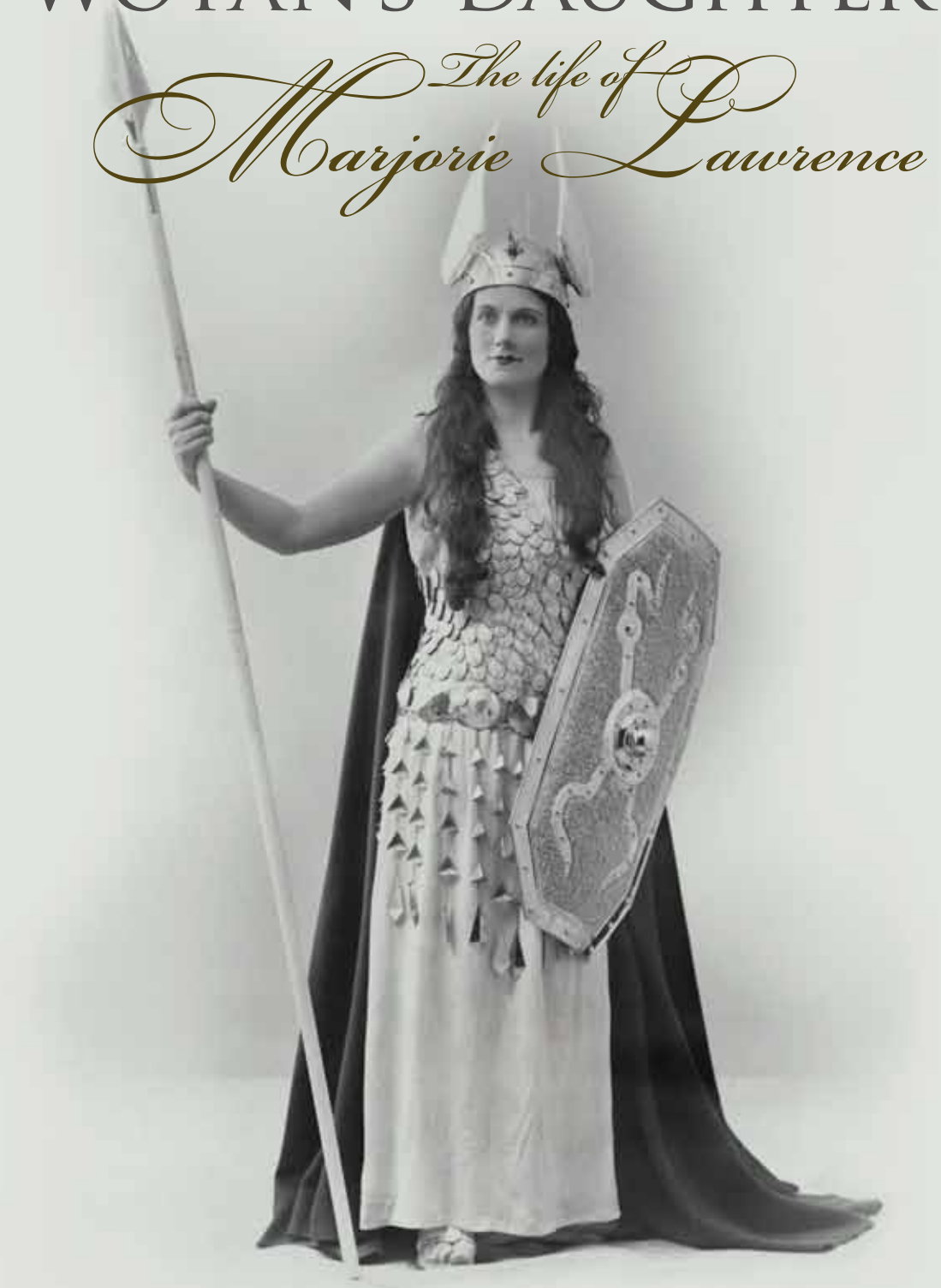
WOTAN'S DAUGHTER

The life of Marjorie Lawrence



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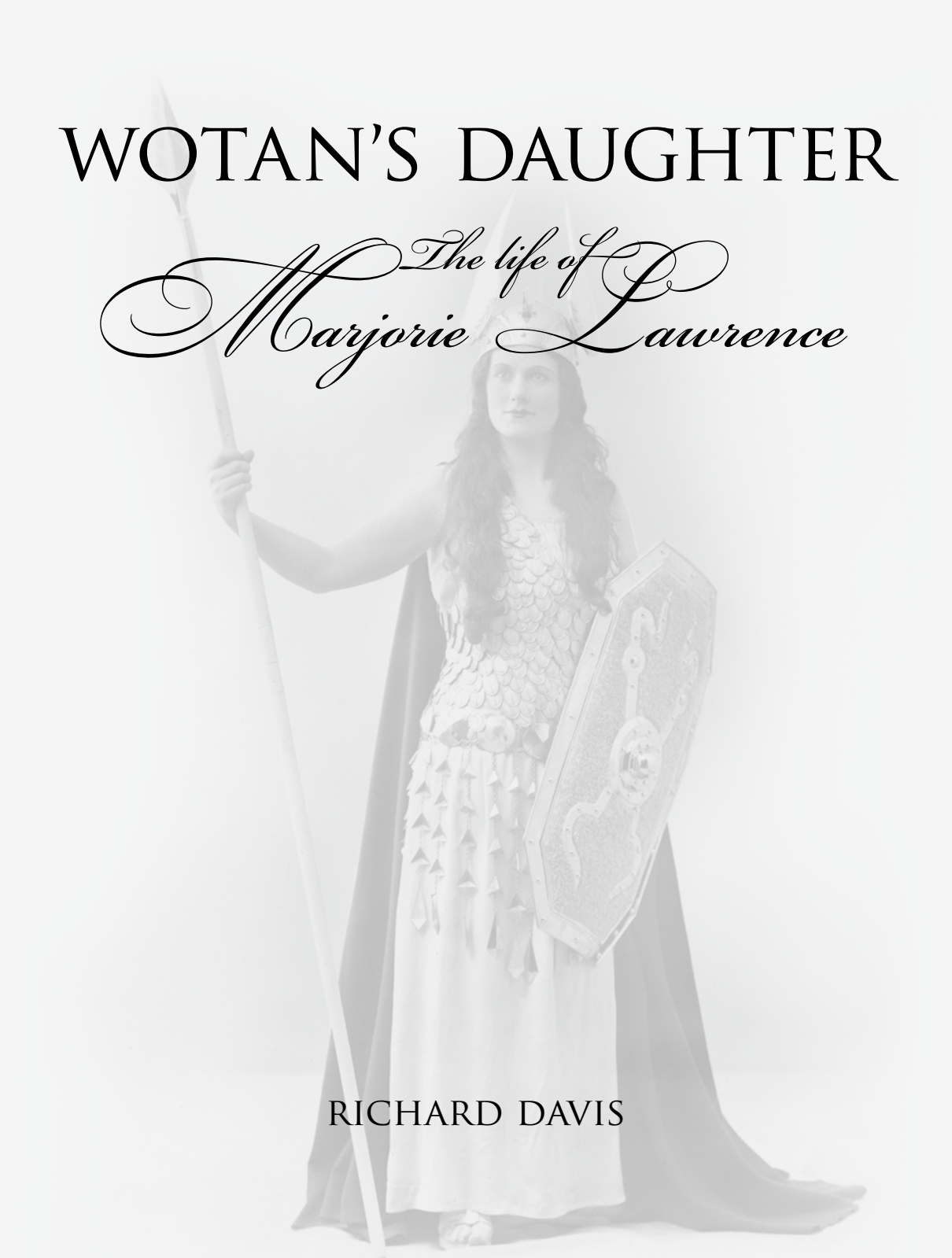

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This book is respectfully dedicated to the memory of

Sheila Prior, AM, BEM, DLJ
1914–2004

Sheila Prior devoted her life to working in an honorary capacity for various community organisations and for the arts. During a thirty-two-year tenure as Founding President and Chairperson of the Australian Opera Auditions Committee Inc., Sheila was instrumental in raising more than two million dollars. These funds were used to support talented Australian singers, conductors and instrumentalists.

Nothing is impossible, nothing hopeless if you have courage and faith in God. Don't ever lose your sense of humour. If you can keep laughing you are safe. I have walked hand in hand with God. He has given me strength. It has made every impossible thing, possible.

Marjorie Lawrence

Contents

Foreword

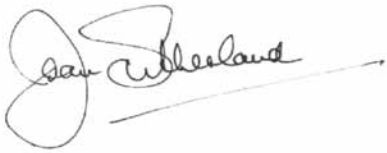
I first heard the glorious voice of Marjorie Lawrence just before my fourteenth birthday in September 1944 in Sydney. I can still hear her incomparable sound in Dido's 'Lament' as if it were yesterday. Five years later Joan and I adored her Sydney concerts – she gave at least six in June and July 1949.

Her sublime final scene from *Götterdämmerung*, her 'O don fatale', her 'Divinités du Styx' remain with me forever. If only I had heard her Valentine in *Les Huguenots* at the Opéra in Paris in 1936!

She came to La Scala in 1966 to see Joan as Donna Anna and we spent a memorable evening after the opera. We later had the indescribable pleasure of being in the same concert together for the United Nations in New York in 1976. Marjorie sang 'Waltzing Matilda' from her wheelchair and the entire audience was in tears. How privileged we were to share even a tiny part in her life.

In our opinion the voice of Marjorie Lawrence was the only Wagnerian comparable to Kirsten Flagstad and certainly one of the three greatest ever to come from Australia.

Bravo to Richard Davis for the long-awaited biography, which restores a great singer to her rightful place in operatic history.



Joan Sutherland, OM, AC, DBE

Richard Bonynge, AC, CBE

Preface

On 20 April 1955 the world premiere of one of the few successful opera films to come out of Hollywood was given in Melbourne, Australia. Within days the film was released across Australia, then the United States and Great Britain. It received rave reviews wherever it was shown. Audiences flocked to see it and the film netted millions of dollars for Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

The film was called *Interrupted Melody* and was based on a best-selling book of the same name. It told the story of an Australian country girl named Marjorie Lawrence who rose to become one of the world's great opera singers before being struck down by a crippling disease. Audiences reached for their handkerchiefs as they watched the film's glamorous star, Eleanor Parker, fight pain, disability and depression to get back on her feet – metaphorically and physically – and to return to the opera stage, aided and abetted by Glenn Ford, playing the heroine's devoted husband. The film combined rags to riches, romance, glamour, tragedy, courage and ultimately triumph, along with good acting and the best representation on screen up to that time of opera staging and opera singing.

The question therefore arises: why, with a successful book and a successful film chronicling Marjorie Lawrence's life, is a modern biography needed? A number of sound reasons answer this question, the most obvious being that Marjorie had another thirty years of active life *after* the book was published.

Secondly, the book *Interrupted Melody* was ghost-written for Marjorie as her autobiography, with all the information it contains supplied by her and not independently verified by the ghost writer. By comparison with the autobiographies of most prima donnas, *Interrupted Melody* is delightfully candid, but when the book was written Marjorie was still active as a singer and therefore selective about what she revealed, omitting or underplaying anything that might have been harmful to her career. Marjorie also took a great deal of poetic licence in reporting certain events, especially those of her early years, and in some cases the ghost writer (expert though he was) embroidered them further.

Thirdly, although modesty was not a particularly conspicuous trait in Marjorie's character (it is rare among prima donnas), she is modest about her own accomplishments in *Interrupted Melody*. Nowhere in the book will the reader find the kind of objective analysis of her voice and her singing necessary to fully appreciate her art. Nor will the reader find comparison between Marjorie and other Wagnerian sopranos, also necessary if she is to be accorded her rightful place among them.

The film of *Interrupted Melody* takes enormous liberties with the already dubious content of the book, and admirable though it may be as cinema, if we relied upon it for our understanding of Marjorie Lawrence we would end up with a much distorted view.

Another compelling reason is that Marjorie Lawrence is one of those musicians

of the past who is ripe for re-evaluation. Apart from vintage record collectors, Wagner historians, a small claque of her devoted former students and the fading memories of some very elderly opera goers, she is largely forgotten – a fate she does not deserve. There is plenty of convincing evidence in the form of personal recollections, contemporary criticism and sound recordings to prove beyond doubt that she is worthy of much wider recognition and a place among the greatest Wagner singers of all time.

Equally compelling is just how inspiring Marjorie's personal story is. She was not the first and will not be the last celebrity to fall victim to a crippling disease at the height of her career, but few have fallen from so high or climbed back so far. In her lifetime Marjorie's indomitable spirit served as an inspiration to others suffering disease and injury, and there is no reason why it should not serve the same commendable purpose for all time.

It is my sincere hope that this biography will swing the spotlight back onto Marjorie Lawrence, fill the omissions and correct the inaccuracies of the autobiography and the Hollywood movie and restore this courageous Australian to her rightful place in musical history. If it does, it will be due in no small part to the many people who generously shared their knowledge, opinions, reminiscences, records, recordings, enthusiasm, advice and encouragement with me.

I am deeply indebted to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II who graciously shared her recollection of Marjorie with me and gave me permission to quote her. Also to Dalton Baldwin, James Bantin, Tom Bath, Mark Beasley, Judith Bent, Mike Blyth, Janet Brien, Matthew Briggs, Katherine Brisbane, AM, Monica Bullen, Ita Buttrose, AO, CBE, L. Carroll, Ann E. Case, Victoria Chance, Karen Clayton, Colleen Cole, Marlene Cook, Keith Curry, Madeleine Curtis, Violet Dandy, Michael Dixon, Annette Drysdale, the late Peter Egan, OAM, Jean-Jacques Eggler, Lauris Elms, AM, OBE, Norman Falconer, Ann Fischer, Hedwig Fojt, Deborah Franco, Christina Garrett, Pat Gladden, Suzetta Glenn, Dr Elaine Harriss, Pamela Hinde, Lorilee Huffman, Eric Jones, Tony Jordan, June Knight, the late Dr Frank Lappin, Neil Lawrence, Richard Le Sueur, Judith Lincoln, Patricia M. Lloyd, Diane Longinotti, John Lucas, James K. McCully, Dave McHaney, Ron Millard, Charles Miller, Angela Moore-Swafford, Prof. Allison Nelson Loebbaka, Gloria Norton, Norma Paley, Mavis Palmer, Elizabeth Phillips, Dr John A. Phillips, Dr Raeschelle Potter-Deimel, Murray Richmond, Liz Robbins, Diane Russell, Helen Ryan, Pamela Sanabria, Ian Schram, Patricia Schroeter, John Preston Smith, Mariella Soprano, Margaret Stewart, Prof. David Tunley, AM, Patti Vance Hays, Florence Waite, Joseph Ward, OBE, Jonathan Mark Winchester, John Woods, Judy Wright, Dr John M. Yarborough, Edward Young and Sue Zellers.

I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided to me by the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra and the Archives Nationales de France, Paris; The Bibliothèque & Archives de la Ville de Lausanne; the Libraries of the University of Queensland; National Library of Australia; State Library of Victoria; Canberra School of Music

Library; Gold Coast City Council Library Services; Caltech, Pasadena; Garland County Historical Society, Arkansas; Kosciusko County Historical Society, Indiana; Winchelsea & District Historical Society; Geelong Historical Society; Lorne Historical Society; the Geelong Heritage Centre, and the Musicological Society of Australia; Geelong Advertiser; Camperdown Chronicle; Colac Herald; Torquay Surf Coast Times; Geelong Independent and Gramophone Magazine, London. I am also grateful to Southern Illinois University Press for permission to quote from their edition of *Interrupted Melody*.

A special debt of gratitude is owed to Richard Bonynge, AC, CBE, for encouraging me to write this book and contributing the splendid foreword, and to the late Dame Joan Sutherland, OM, AC, DBE, who graciously added her imprimatur to Richard's words.

I also wish to thank David Carlson, Dean of Library Affairs at Southern Illinois University and Pamela Hackbart-Dean and her expert team at the Special Collections Center, Morris Library, who provided access to 'The Marjorie Lawrence Papers' and offered willing assistance during my research. Also to Dr Dona Bachman and her team at the university museum who granted me access to their collection of Marjorie's stage costumes and memorabilia, and to Janine Wagner and her team at the School of Music. To all these friends and colleagues at Southern Illinois University, I offer sincere thanks for their hospitality during my visit to Carbondale in 2010.

I am also indebted to Dr H.D. (Erik) Dervos, who generously provided me with access to his extensive collection of recordings of Marjorie Lawrence, helped me with my research and offered much good advice, and to Dr Jeffrey Gawler, FRCP, who generously undertook an expert reassessment of Marjorie's medical condition for me.

I also acknowledge with profound gratitude the financial assistance provided to me for this project by the Australian Opera Auditions Committee Inc. through the 2011 Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonynge Award. This group of dedicated supporters of the arts has provided assistance to singers and other practitioners in the arts over many years. I am also grateful to Michael Bollen and his team at Wakefield Press and to my editor Penelope Curtin, all of whom brought their expert skills to the production of this book.

Finally, may I offer my thanks to you, the reader of this book, and express a sincere hope that you enjoy reading Marjorie's story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Richard Davis

Chapter One

‘Push the Pram for Baby’

Australia as a nation was just six years old when Marjorie Lawrence was born. Until the Earl of Hopetoun, representing the octogenarian Queen Victoria, proclaimed the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901, the six Australian states had been individually answerable to their imperial masters in Whitehall. Marjorie’s formative years coincided with the formative years of her nation and she would be a young woman before Australia had a purpose-built national capital. In the meantime, Melbourne, the capital of Marjorie’s home state of Victoria, would serve as the seat of the new nation’s parliament.

Melbourne was the richest and grandest city in the new Commonwealth, built on the proceeds of nineteenth-century gold rushes, but in 1907 subsistence living on unpromising land and hardship reminiscent of the pioneering era could be encountered not far from ‘Marvellous Melbourne’. A drive south-west of Melbourne for about six hours in a horse-drawn buggy (or a bit less in one of those new-fangled motor cars) would lead to the village of Deans Marsh, centre of a small farming and sawmilling community in the northern foothills of the Otway Ranges. Deans Marsh comprised a smattering of humble, well-kept commercial buildings, a community hall, a church and about a dozen modest houses, one of which was the home of the Lawrence family.

Marjorie’s father, William Lawrence, was a first-generation Australian, the son of an Englishman who had come to Victoria as a free settler in the 1850s.[1] ‘Bill’, as he was universally known, was a resourceful, no-nonsense man described by a contemporary as ‘tough as goat’s knees, but kind of heart’. He was also good looking with broad shoulders, sound limbs and a pleasing face adorned with the masculine trademark of the time – a large, drooping moustache.

Bill Lawrence turned the heads and the hearts of many local girls in his youth, but took his time to choose a bride. In his late thirties he fell in love with twenty-seven-year-old Elizabeth Smith, the daughter of a local farmer. ‘Lizzie’, as her family called her, had a forthright personality to match Bill’s and was by all accounts a beauty, having inherited her Irish mother’s dark good looks.[2]

The courtship of Bill Lawrence and Elizabeth Smith, as may seem appropriate for the future parents of an opera star, was musical. Elizabeth played the wheezy reed organ for services in St Paul's, the village church; Bill had a fine baritone voice and joined the church choir to be near his sweetheart. Both were talented amateur musicians, Elizabeth playing the piano as well as she played the organ and Bill invariably seconded to provide the music at local dances with his concertina or his home-made one-string fiddle. When not singing in the choir, Bill, accompanied by his sweetheart, was also a dab hand at comic music hall songs and the sentimental ballads of the day.[3]

Bill and Elizabeth Lawrence were married in 1898 and set up house in a modest timber cottage in Deans Marsh.[4] In neatly kept paddocks behind the house they established a mixed farm, growing oats, potatoes and other small crops, and kept a couple of cows, horses, some sheep, pigs and poultry.

Children soon began to arrive: first a son, Lindsay, born in 1899, then another son, Edwin (known as 'Ted' or 'Snowy') in 1901 and a daughter, Eileen, the following year. In 1904 and 1905 two more baby boys were born: Percy and Alfred. In later years Percy figured prominently in Marjorie's career, sharing many of her triumphs, but little Alfred, like so many infants in times past, sickened and died before his first birthday.

As well as being a competent man of the land, Bill Lawrence was also an enterprising man of business. If he had lived in our time he might have become a property developer or an angel investor. He devised several schemes to supplement his meagre income from the farm and to support his growing family. At different times he established, operated and sold off for a profit a butcher's shop, a bakery, a smith and a saddlery. Such enterprise earned him the respect of the community and the devotion and gratitude of his family, who prospered from his foresight and hard work.

On 17 February 1907, Bill and Elizabeth's sixth child and second daughter was born, like all of her siblings in the big bed in the front bedroom of the Lawrence house. The names Marjorie and Florence were chosen for her, presumably because they were popular and fashionable at the time, as there had been no Marjories or Florences in recent generations of either parent's family. In a land where sobriquets are valued more than proper names, Marjorie was speedily shortened to 'Marge', and the nickname 'Babe' applied to her by her father.[5]

Marjorie described herself as 'a thin, unlovely individual with wispy, straw-coloured hair', and no one gazing on the little girl as her mother proudly showed her off to family, friends and neighbours in the small community could have predicted that she would one day conquer the glamorous international world of grand opera. Nor could anyone have predicted the tragedy that was about to strike the Lawrence family.

A few weeks after Marjorie's first birthday, Elizabeth Lawrence found she was pregnant again. Having enjoyed straightforward pregnancies in the past, she

was alarmed to find that this time she was in considerable pain. A doctor in the region's principal town, Winchelsea, examined Elizabeth and confirmed that she was pregnant. He also found a lump in her stomach, which he suspected was a malignant tumour.

A distraught Bill and a frightened Elizabeth drove back to Deans Marsh with the doctor's prognosis ringing in their ears: 'If you were not pregnant Mrs Lawrence, I would recommend the immediate removal of the tumour, but to do so now would almost certainly kill your baby. On the other hand, if you are not operated on and my suspicions are correct, then the tumour may kill you.'

Bill and Elizabeth faced an impossible choice. As Christians and devoted to the family ethos, they were horrified at the thought of being responsible for killing their unborn child, but the alternative seemed too great a sacrifice for Elizabeth, her loving husband and their five young children to make. A wait-and-see policy was adopted and it was hoped (and prayed for) that Elizabeth would give birth to a healthy child then be able to receive life-saving treatment for the tumour.

In the months that followed Elizabeth's cancer spread from her stomach to her liver, and by the time she was due to go into labour it was apparent she might not survive the ordeal. It was also apparent that a house filled with young children was not the place for her confinement, so after Christmas, Elizabeth went to stay with one of Bill's sisters, Louisa Prime, in the neighbouring town of Birregurra.

On 8 January, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. The child survived. He was named Thomas after Elizabeth's brother-in-law Thomas Prime, but in later life was always known by his second name, Allan. Elizabeth never left the bed the Primes had provided for her. Eight days after giving birth, she died and the following week was laid to rest in Bambra Cemetery near Deans Marsh.

Of the shocked and tearful children who gathered around their mother's grave on that hot summer afternoon in 1909, Lindsay, Ted, Eileen and Percy would retain vague but precious memories of their mother. Age denied little 'Marge' and her newborn brother that comfort, but as she would observe later, infancy also spared Marjorie the emotional trauma her father and her older siblings suffered. Innocence also prevented her from realising how her existence complicated the plans a bewildered Bill Lawrence then had to make to keep his household functioning.

It was decided that a motherless home was no place for a newborn baby boy or a two-year-old girl. Both Allan and Marjorie would eventually return home, but for the time being Allan was made a ward of Thomas and Louisa Prime and raised by them at Birregurra, while Marjorie was sent to live with her grandmother, Julia Lawrence, in the home where Bill Lawrence had spent his youth, at Pennyroyal, a few miles from Deans Marsh.

Julia Lawrence, widowed matriarch of the family and in her mid-seventies when her little granddaughter came to live with her, was an important early influence on Marjorie. Years later Marjorie would speculate that the streak of toughness

in her own character which served her career so well was a legacy from her beloved 'Grandma'. Julia Lawrence was typical of the strong-bodied and strong-willed pioneering women who imposed civilisation on remote pockets of the Australian wilderness, and if age had made her body frail her spirit remained unassailable.

Julia had come to Australia in 1854, married Henry Lawrence at Geelong, established a wayside inn on the road to Winchelsea and produced eight children in quick succession, including Marjorie's father.[6] Julia's trials began when Henry Lawrence became an invalid and the inn became insufficient to house and support her large family. She acquired a tract of virgin bushland at Pennyroyal and there carved out a farm, using timber cleared from the property to build a homestead. Forty years later Marjorie would recall the time she spent at Pennyroyal with affectionate nostalgia:

> *Grandmother still lived in the original old homestead which had grown soft and beautiful with the years and my move there made the lives of several people, including mine, immeasurably happier. At my father's place I had been pretty much a pest, but at Pennyroyal I was the only child in the house and treated like a princess. Grandmother bought me a complete new wardrobe and she and her old housekeeper could not have given me more care and adulation had I been a real princess.*[7]

Marjorie was well on the way to becoming in her own words 'a spoiled brat' when Julia Lawrence died just before Christmas in 1910 and Marjorie returned to her family home. There, as she recalled:

> *I was subjected to a toughening process over the next few years, the common lot of any member of a largish, rough and tumble family not over endowed with worldly riches.*

In her absence Bill Lawrence had acquired a housekeeper, the first of several who were paid to manage his house and supposedly look after his children. These women sometimes brought their own children with them, adding to the squeeze in the Lawrence house and leading to juvenile warfare. Some were overfond of liquor, one stole from the family cashbox, and several became infatuated with the still-handsome Bill Lawrence and set about trying to become the next Mrs Lawrence.

Bill missed his 'Lizzie' terribly. Years later Percy Lawrence would remind Marjorie how their father always became 'pretty useless' for a week or two around the middle of January and deeply depressed on the anniversary of their mother's death. Bill was also lonely and the attraction these housekeepers felt towards him may have in some cases been reciprocated, but his brood always put a stop to any romance before it took hold.

> *We Lawrence children had read our fairy stories and we knew what evil creatures stepmothers could be. We made up our collective mind there would be no*

stepmother in our house. Whenever we sensed the possibility of father's installing one, we would forget our bickering and team up to make the life of the woman so miserable as to dissipate her passion and cause her to flee the place.

Marjorie was personally responsible for the demise of one of these hapless creatures, whom she later admitted might have made a suitable wife for her father. Little 'Marge' climbed into a tree and began to howl loudly enough to be heard for miles. Neighbours and passers-by gathered to listen to her. 'I won't come down until that woman goes away! She doesn't like me! She *beats* me!' Marge bellowed while her brothers and sisters, gathered around the base of the tree, added a chorus of 'Poor Marge' and 'Poor Babe'.

Were Australians a people given to lynching, I think that poor housekeeper might have ended her days there and then dangling at the end of a rope. As it was, she rushed into the house, packed her bags and caught the next train back to Melbourne.

When Marjorie's sister Eileen ('Lena' to her devoted brothers and her little sister) reached the age of fourteen she took over the running of her father's household and the threat of infiltration by evil stepmothers passed. Bill Lawrence never remarried, focusing his energies instead on his children and his multifarious business interests.

From an early age, Marjorie was expected to do her share of tasks around the house and farm – washing dishes, making beds, weeding the vegetable patch and helping to tend the animals and poultry. She also learned to ride – the day her father threw her onto the bare back of their placid mare, Bazil. Marjorie developed a lifelong love of horses and quickly became a first-class horsewoman, eagerly taking every opportunity to ride wherever she encountered horses over the next thirty or so years.

Marjorie's schooling began in 1912 when she was sent to William Burt's School on the Deans Marsh to Lorne road. By her own admission she was an unruly student, chattering in class and getting up to mischief in the schoolyard, neither of which endeared her to her teachers, but she was also a precocious learner with a highly retentive memory. Years later those attributes would serve her well when she began to study and learn operatic roles. As she grew older she would attend other schools in the Deans Marsh area, collecting her share of merit certificates, sporting awards and detentions.

In *Interrupted Melody* Marjorie claims that she could not remember a time when she did not want to sing – 'During most of my waking hours little tunes bubbled out of me almost unbidden' – and at age five little Marge had her first opportunity to display her vocal prowess in public.

The Sunday school teacher at St Paul's had asked for volunteers to sing solos in a local concert and Marjorie eagerly put up her hand. At the concert on

the following Saturday, when it came time for Marjorie to perform she sailed confidently out onto the makeshift stage pushing a doll's pram, her blonde hair trimmed with new blue ribbons. When the 'oohing' and 'aahing' subsided, she launched into a rendition of 'Push the Pram for Baby', one of the hit numbers from Lionel Monckton's new musical *Our Miss Gibbs*, although her rendition was more notable for its volume than its vocal finesse.

Marjorie enjoyed holding the audience's attention as she rattled through the song's sentimental lines and mimed the actions ('Push the pram for baby, dear little dimpled baby; turn the corners gently, mind you don't collide'), but at least one of her older brothers was mortified by what he perceived as his baby sister's shameless exhibitionism. From the back of the church, eleven-year-old Ted interjected loudly: 'Go 'ome, Marge, Dad wants ya!', but Marjorie was not fooled by the ploy. She finished her song and basked in the prima donna's reception the audience gave her. From that day onwards, she claimed, her heart was set on becoming a singer.

Soon after this Marjorie began taking piano lessons. A Miss Jenkins drove over in her buggy from Birregurra once a week to give Marjorie and her brother Percy lessons on the old upright piano that took pride of place in the front room of the Lawrence house. Nothing is known of Miss Jenkins, but she must have been a competent teacher. Percy played the piano well throughout his life and dreamed of becoming a concert pianist until he sustained a serious injury to a finger in a farm accident. Marjorie learned enough from Miss Jenkins to be able to accompany herself in private once her career became established.

All the Lawrence children had musical voices, including little Allan who was reunited with his brothers and sisters at Deans Marsh when he reached school age. Marjorie's eldest brother, Lindsay, came closest to matching her vocal amplitude, with a fine baritone voice resembling his father's and which was much in demand for benefit concerts, patriotic ceremonies and weddings. As they came of age, each of the children joined the choir of St Paul's, where their aunt, Emma Smith, had replaced their mother as organist.

In 1917 the old vicar at St Paul's retired and was replaced by the Reverend Alex Pearce from Melbourne, the first serious musician Marjorie had met and the first to recognise the exceptional quality of her voice. Alex Pearce was a romantic figure – tall, distinguished-looking and seeking solace in a small bush parish following the recent death of his young wife. Most of the females in the congregation developed a crush on the handsome young widower, including Marjorie, and when it was discovered that he had been on the stage before joining the ministry, was a fine pianist and had trained choirs which had successfully competed at the prestigious South Street Eisteddfods in Ballarat, his appeal quadrupled.[8]

Pearce immediately set about improving the choir at St Paul's, dispensing with those whose voices had been tolerated too long and recruiting younger singers like the Lawrences who could cope with the more sophisticated and 'serious' choral repertoire he was determined to introduce. In number and quality, the choir of the

tiny sun-bleached wooden church in Deans Marsh could not hope to compete with the great choral societies of the capital, but in terms of broadening their and the community's experience of good music Pearce seemed truly to be a godsend – not least to Marjorie.

Pearce quickly recognised that ten-year-old Marjorie's voice was exceptional; powerful for her age, wide ranging and beginning to show the velvety texture and deep resonance of a future mezzo-soprano or contralto. Marjorie was soon promoted to principal soloist with the choir and a whole new world of music was revealed to her, which she joyfully embraced.

> *With the advent of Alex Pearce, singing for the first time became a serious business for me. Until then I had sung when and how the spirit moved me. The new minister put curbs on my carolling and endeavoured to show me that music was like grammar; that there were rules for governing its construction and interpretation. At first I found the restrictions of musical law and order irksome and singing ceased to be fun. But, as we learned excerpts from the cantatas of Bach and the oratorios of Handel, Stainer and Mendelssohn, I found a new and deeper joy in being able to sing.*

As well as being an innovative choir master, Pearce was also a strict one and while she revelled in the opportunities she was being given, the larrikin in Marjorie rebelled at Pearce's insistence on long, frequent and rigorous rehearsals.

> *Many was the time that Alex Pearce's choir practice was delayed while that good man left the other singers and strode down to a large pond that lay between our farm and the church, compelled me to desist from my favourite sport of catching tadpoles, and hustled me off, frequently dripping wet, to sing.*

Marjorie's voice was soon being heard in concerts organised by Pearce all over the Deans Marsh, Winchelsea and Colac area and across the Otways in the coastal resort of Lorne. More often than not it was the Lawrence family who were the staples at these events, Marjorie topping the bill with Lindsay and Ted (who had a pleasant tenor voice) in support and Percy at the piano. Marjorie wondered later in life if the good people of that part of the western district might not have got heartily sick of 'trios by the Lawrence family', 'duets by the Lawrence family' and endless 'solos by the Lawrence family'.

'Welcome Home' concerts for troops returning from the First World War also provided opportunities for these youngsters to show off their talents. Thirty years on Marjorie would write:

> *I sometimes speculate now upon what the feelings of the returning heroes must have been when they realized they had fought to preserve a way of life that produced precocious, stagey little girls who warbled that 'life was only made for laughter'.*

If war-weary soldiers and work-weary farmers had sometimes been ambivalent about their appreciation of Marjorie, the municipal leaders of Deans Marsh were not. To them Marjorie represented an opportunity to put their small town 'on the map'. One of these, Shire President Mountjoy, bestowed on Marjorie the title 'Our Little Melba', making reference to the most famous of Australian women at the time, the internationally acclaimed 'Queen of Song', Dame Nellie Melba.

Marjorie liked the appellation and was probably unaware at the time that almost every promising young female singer in Australia had been accorded the same title since Melba conquered the opera world in the 1890s. Marjorie knew little about Melba beyond what she had read in newspapers, but she did know the great singer's exquisite soprano voice. A friend of the family in Deans Marsh had a wind-up gramophone and a collection of fragile shellac records. Prominent among these and frequently played in Marjorie's presence were some of Melba's lilac-labelled His Master's Voice recordings and some blue-label Columbia's by another great Dame, the stalwart English contralto Clara Butt. Because of the extraordinary range of Marjorie's voice she was able to imitate both these women, which, in itself presented a dangerous dilemma.

> *I could not make up my mind whether I wanted to become a contralto like Butt or a soprano like Melba. I spent hours at a time out in the paddocks in the evening riding like a fury without saddle or bridle in the bright moonlight – and singing at the top of my voice. First I would be Butt, growling away at 'Land of Hope and Glory', then Melba letting off the pyrotechnics of the 'Mad Scene' from 'Lucia' – to the utter bewilderment of stupid-looking sheep who gathered round to listen and to the interest of the neighbours who would greet one another the next morning with: 'Marge was out again last night. The breeze was blowing in our direction'.*

There are those familiar with Marjorie's recordings but not her career who would say she never fully made up her mind which register suited her best. At different times in her career she essayed both soprano and contralto roles, often singing them with a distinctly lighter (but not Melba-like) or darker (but hardly Butt-like) tone.

Singing on horseback in the cool night air also set a precedent Marjorie followed for the rest of her life. While she watched other singers coddle themselves in scarves and stuffy rooms, for Marjorie fresh air was invigorating and exposure to the elements, she believed, toughened her body and her voice. While that might sound like a dangerous philosophy for a singer with a fragile voice and a fragile constitution, it suited Marjorie, who was blessed with a robust frame and resilient vocal cords.

In 1921 when Marjorie was fourteen, Bill Lawrence sold the little farm in Deans Marsh and bought a larger property three miles from Winchelsea, the

regional centre on the Barwon River. Here he built a more spacious house and expanded his farming and business interests, climbing as Marjorie put it, 'a rung or two up the local social ladder'. Bill also bought the family's first motor car – a black T-Model Ford – which sons but not daughters were taught to drive.

Many factors were now at work directing Marjorie towards a career as a singer, along with a few, equally forceful, working in the opposite direction. If one single event could be said to have convinced Marjorie that her future lay in singing, it was an unplanned and unexpected encounter she had with a player-piano salesman shortly after the move to the new property.

Being a local musical celebrity did not excuse Marjorie from her share of the work on the new farm and riding into Winchelsea once a week to buy supplies was one of her chores. It was on one of these shopping expeditions that Marjorie heard the sound of a piano being played very proficiently from inside a large van parked in the centre of the town. Intrigued by this, Marjorie rode over to the van, which turned out to be a mobile furniture showroom.

> *As I looked in I saw the owner, a stout, pleasant looking man, playing a player-piano and doing it very well. The instrument was equipped with all kinds of gadgets and he was using them to get beautiful and thoroughly musical effects. The man smiled and beckoned me in. He was playing a ballad I knew and, standing alongside him, I began to sing and despite the fact that his instrument was a Pianola, I never before had sung with so sensitive an accompanist. A crowd gathered but we kept on with our concert, my marketing completely forgotten.*

For each of the next three or four days, Marjorie found an excuse to ride into Winchelsea, but as she discovered it was impossible to give daily recitals in the main street of one's home town without its becoming general knowledge.

> *When father heard the news, he read the riot act to me, warning me of the dangers of talking to strange men – but not before my musician friend, whose name I never did discover, had told me I should go to Paris to study.*

Exactly why this musical salesman should have suggested Paris rather than London, Milan, Berlin or anywhere else to Marjorie, she never knew. It may have been because Melba had gone there to study, but whatever the reason, it would prove prescient advice. To Paris Marjorie would eventually go, and although this became her goal from this time onwards, it would take several years and much hard work before it was realised.

As the years passed, Marjorie's voice strengthened, along with her determination to become a professional singer. By 1923, when she turned sixteen, she realised that if she was to avoid squandering the magnificent gift she had been given, she needed an expert singing teacher to guide her. While there was no one suitable in Winchelsea, there were several in Melbourne. The reaction from Marjorie's father

when she asked if she might travel up to Melbourne to consult some professional singing teachers, with a view to taking lessons, shocked and disappointed her.

> *Dad was violently opposed to the idea. Singing in the home, in church, at local gatherings was all very well, but going to Melbourne for lessons might lead anywhere – even to the professional stage! No daughter of his, he raged, was going on the stage. And he was surprised and hurt that I should even contemplate leaving the home he had worked and striven to make comfortable and happy for us all. I didn't argue. That would have been futile. When Dad's mind was made up, it remained made up. I knew that if I were to go to Melbourne to study singing I would have to do what is popularly described as 'running away from home'.*

Marjorie confided the plan she had hatched to her sister Lena and brother, Ted. 'You can't do it, Marge,' they said, 'not until you're eighteen; 'til then Dad could get the coppers onto you and they'd bring you home'. Marjorie doubted that her father (whose love for her was never in doubt) would have done anything quite so drastic, but she could imagine him following her to Melbourne and dragging her home in disgrace. It was not a risk Marjorie was prepared to take, so she bided her time – for two frustrating years.

To occupy herself and to equip herself with a skill that might provide employment when she finally got to Melbourne, Marjorie began taking sewing lessons (along with a group of other young girls) from a petite, hawk-featured Englishwoman in her early forties who had come to live in the district – a Mrs Boddington.

> *Ada Boddington fascinated me. She had an elegance and* savoir-faire *rare among the women of our community. Perhaps it was their realization that she was 'different', which caused some of them to dislike her. Frequently I heard her referred to as a 'red-ragger', because of her suffragist activities. While we sewed, Ada would regale us with tales of the famous and glamorous people she had known or seen in England, which further whetted my desire to see the world outside Winchelsea.*

To this day there are folk in the Winchelsea district who remember Ada Boddington as an embarrassing rebel who upset the community's respectable complacency and they hint at activities she was involved in which appalled their parents. For all that, Ada Boddington was an expert needlewoman and the skills she passed on to Marjorie enabled the future struggling singing student to save a great deal of money by making her own clothes. 'Boddie', as Marjorie came to call her, also proved to be a keen supporter of Marjorie's ambitions.

Also during this waiting period, Marjorie had her first romance – with a young man named Patrick Considine, whom she described as 'a hefty lump of Australian manhood', and for a while it seemed she might abandon her musical ambitions