



One Sunday in June 1901, the *Otago Witness* columnist Pasquin took a stroll through Dunedin's Southern Cemetery: 'I came across a grave in a shady corner enclosed with an iron railing. The grave was profuse with forget-me-nots, and at the head was a cream rose tree in full bloom, the petals of the roses falling amongst the blue-eyed forget-me-nots. A neat white tombstone was erected on the grave, and the inscription thereon read: 'Erected by the Pollard Opera Company, In Memory of Their Late Musical Director, H.F. Harrison (H.F. Towle), Died June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1899, Aged 51 years.'

Henry Francis Towle was born in Geelong, Victoria, on 24 March 1848, to Sarah Ann Towle (nee Townsend) and Thomas Towle, a draper. Early in his career Towle was organist to several Melbourne churches, including St Francis' Church, St George's Church, and St John's, Toorak. In 1874 he was convicted of illegally pawning a piano, the property of a music warehouse for which he was an agent. He was sentenced to eighteen months in prison.

On his release Towle looked for fresh pastures in New Zealand, arriving in Auckland in November 1875. He was soon touring as manager, vocalist, and pianist for entertainments centred on 'Mons. F. Oriel's world-renowned troupe of dogs, trained to read, spell, cipher, perform second sight, hold dialogues, and tell fortunes'. He then found conducting jobs with the Lydia Howard Burlesque and Opera Troupe and the Chicago Christie Minstrels, and was advertised as the 'Silvery Tenor'.

In 1877 Towle settled in Christchurch, becoming organist at St Paul's Presbyterian Church and the Church of the Blessed Sacrament. He set up a teaching practice and directed an amateur production of *Les Cloches de Corneville* that was so successful it led to the formation of a Christchurch Operatic Society. Towle also founded the Fraternity of Mutual Imps, a group which organised social entertainments and promoted friendship between the literary, musical, and theatrical professions.

Towle returned to Melbourne in 1882 to join Australia's largest theatrical organisation, the J.C. Williamson Company. From this time onwards he was billed as H.T. Harrison, perhaps because his criminal conviction was more widely known about in Australia. Over the next eleven years Towle was the principal musical director of the company's Australasian touring productions of Gilbert and Sullivan and other light operas. In 1887 he conducted the first New Zealand performances of *The Mikado* and *Iolanthe*, both in Dunedin.

In 1894 Towle joined the Pollard Opera Company with its famous 'Lilliputian' troupe of child performers. That year the company performed *Prince Bulbo*, a comic opera composed by Towle and based on Thackeray's *The Rose and The Ring*. He later composed and arranged music for a 'merry nautical burlesque' titled *Saucy Susie*. A versatile musician, Towle occasionally took male singing roles rather than conducting.

Towle married and divorced twice. His five-year marriage to Jane Hall ended in 1884 on the grounds of his adultery. His second marriage, to the singer Aggie Kelton, ended in 1899 after Aggie left him for another conductor, George Hall.

Harry Towle was performing with the Pollard Company in Dunedin in May 1899 but when the company left he could not join them due to serious illness (he reportedly suffered from asthma). The gifted and hard-working conductor died at High Street on 2 June 1899 and his friends in the Opera Company, though absent, expressed their love and gratitude through the memorial that remains today in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery.

David Murray  
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#### SOURCES INCLUDE:

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*Argus*, 13 May 1874, 5; 24 July 1874, 4.

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*Evening Post*, 14 February 1876, 2; 20 March 1876, 2; 14 April 1899, 5.

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