



KALGOORLIE-BOULDER

WALK OF FAME

EILEEN JOYCE

1908-1991

Eileen Joyce, a miner's daughter from Boulder became one of the century's most famous pianists. Her debut at a Proms Concert in London paved the way to a glittering international career which saw her feature on the soundtrack of a number of major films and the publication of a children's book based on her early life.



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Joyce, Eileen Alannah (1908–1991)

by Ava Hubble

The Australian pianist Eileen Joyce, who died in England on March 25, rose from poverty-stricken obscurity to become one of this century's most famous concert stars.

She was one of the four children of Irish immigrants, Joseph and Alice Joyce, and she was born in a tent at Zeehan, Tasmania, in 1912 [1908]. She spent most of her childhood in Boulder, Western Australia, where her father worked as a miner.

The family lived opposite a miners' saloon run by a relative and it was there that Eileen first began experimenting at the keyboard, tinkering on a battered old piano in the bar. Her love of music was encouraged by nuns at the local convent school and when she was about 10 they recommended that she be sent to develop her talents at a larger convent in Perth.

She was never to forget her father's embarrassment when he was forced to admit that he could neither read nor write when enrolling her at the city school.

When Percy Grainger was invited to the convent to hear her play, he pronounced her "the most transcendently gifted child" he had ever met.

Another visitor, the touring German pianist Wilhelm Backhaus, insisted that she be sent to further her studies in Leipzig. The miners of Boulder passed the hat around to help her parents pay her fare and expenses.

Years later, during an interview, she recalled her long, lonely sea voyage to Europe, and her arrival in Leipzig in the 1920s, "a homesick waif and stray without warm knickers". The reception party, she said, was disappointed to find she was not an Aborigine.

But she also recalled the magnificent musical education she received in Leipzig, where her tutors included "the emperor" of pianists, Artur Schnabel.

From Leipzig she went to London. She was then about 20 and not only an exceptionally gifted young musician, but an extremely beautiful, red-haired young woman. Throughout her career she was to be admired almost as much for her beauty as her performances.

She made her London debut at a Proms Concert conducted by Henry Wood. Shortly after, the resourceful young pianist made a recording in London, at her own expense, and sent



copies to all the leading conductors of the day. Offers of engagements with top orchestras followed.

In 1936 she made her first ABC tour of Australia. During that visit her proud father asked her to play his favourite Irish air, Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms. By then she knew dozens of concertos and sonatas by heart, but she had to admit she did not know the score of her father's favourite song.

"Then all your schooling's been wasted," he furiously complained at a reception in her honour. She quickly learned the piece to please him.

Although she left Australia in her early teens and never returned to make her home here, she always made a point of expressing her pride in Australia and its people overseas and she never attempted to gloss over her own humble beginnings.

Perhaps that is why she was regarded with such affection by her Australian contemporaries.

She was certainly never a victim of the tall poppy syndrome. In fact, throughout her glittering international career Australia constantly held her up as "a magnificent ambassadress" and a fine example to young Australians.

Following her return to London after her 1936 ABC tour she married an Englishman, Douglas Legh Barratt, and gave birth to their son, John.

But her first husband was killed while on active service during World War II; in 1945 she married again, this time to the immensely wealthy British film magnate Christopher Mann.

*The same year she was featured playing on the sound track of two major British films, *The Seventh Veil*, starring Ann Todd, and the classic, *Brief Encounter*, directed by David Lean.*

A children's book about her early life was published in 1949 by the English writer Clare Hoskyns-Abahall, who described the miners of "Boulder City" as "cowboys" in sombreros and chaps and reported that Eileen had often roamed in the hills of "West Australia" leading her pet kangaroo Twink by a chain attached to his "beautifullystudded collar".

*But although the book provoked plenty of guffaws in Australia, it inspired the extremely popular 1951 film, *Wherever She Goes*, which consolidated Joyce's reputation as a first-rate ambassador.*

It starred Suzanne Parrett as the young Eileen, and the famous pianist appeared as her herself, the grown-up star, in the final reel.



In addition to constant reports in the Australian media about her triumphs at Carnegie Hall and other famous concert venues, there were lavishly illustrated magazine articles about her increasingly glamorous lifestyle.

But even accounts of her Mayfair apartment, her seven grand pianos, her country home, Chartwell Farm ("right next door to Sir Winston Churchill's Chartwell Manor") and her concert gowns designed by the leading couturiers of the day failed to provoke widespread envy or acid media comment.

Australia always seemed of the opinion that the daughter of the battling Boulder miner had earned her place in the sun.

She ended her career in Aberdeen in 1960 by closing the lid of the piano after a recital and announcing that she was in pain from muscular problems in her shoulders and "utterly exhausted" after a lifetime of extensive touring.

There was talk of a comeback following her brief, dazzling guest appearance at a charity concert in London in 1967, but she thought better of it.

In 1971 she received an honorary doctorate of music from Cambridge University and in 1979 a doctorate from the University of Western Australia. In 1981 she was created a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George.

The same year she visited Australia to adjudicate at the Sydney International Piano Competition and to attend the official opening of the Eileen Joyce Studio at the University of Western Australia.

She donated the \$110,000 cost of the studio as a tribute to her parents, but during that trip she confessed that she had virtually lost touch with her siblings over the years.

She also attended the 1985 Sydney International Piano Competition and made her last trip home to Australia in 1989 when she attended an ABC concert in her honour at Sydney Town Hall.

Following the death of her husband, Christopher Mann, in 1983, she made her home at White Hart Lodge, a converted 14th-century monastery in Limpsfield, Surrey.

It was there that she suffered a fall on March 24. She died the following day in hospital. She had been in poor health for several years and friends report that she was particularly distressed by the increasing loss of her short-term memory. "Mummy's going dottie", she frequently complained during her last trip to Australia.



Her funeral was held yesterday in Limpsfield. She is survived by her son, John, her daughter-in-law, Rebecca and her grandson, Alexander.

A studio at the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's new headquarters at Ultimo is to be dedicated to her memory.

Reference: <http://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/joyce-eileen-alannah-14817>. 18/06/2018