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978-0-521-45644-9 - Pioneer Players: The Lives of Louis and Hilda Esson

Peter Fitzpatrick

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THE LIVES OF
LOUIS AND HILDA ESSON

PETER FITZPATRICK

Department of English

Monash University



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Pioneer Players' programme emblem, 1922.

Palmer papers, NLA MS 1174. See text, p.182.

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Illustrations

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Pioneer Players' programme emblem, 1922.

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Louis Esson, aged about twelve, with his half-brother, Frank Brown,
c. 1890.

Member of the Paterson family, believed to be Mary-Jane
Esson, c. 1885.

Louis Esson, aged about twenty, with Frank Brown, c. 1898.

Louis Esson, aged about twenty-two, c. 1901.

Paterson family portrait, Louis' cousins Elizabeth (Betty),
Esther, and his aunt Elizabeth (Lizzie, wife of Hugh Paterson),
c. 1910.

John Ford Paterson in his studio, c. 1910.

Hilda Bull, aged about eighteen, c. 1905.

Frank Brown in boxing pose, c. 1910.

Katharine Susannah Prichard, c. 1910–11.

Hilda Bull, aged about twenty-five, c. 1912.

Christian Jollie-Smith, c. 1909.

Hilda Esson, London, 1919.

Facing page 244:

Scene from the Pioneer Players' production of Stewart Macky's

John Blake, August 1922.

Leo Burke as Chopsey and Frank Keon as Smithy in *The Woman
Tamer*, October 1922.

George Dawe as Bongo in the Pioneer Players' production of
The Woman Tamer, October 1922.

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Palmer family with Hugh Esson, at Emerald, c. 1923.
E. J. Brady at Mallacoota House, mid-1920s.
Stewart Macky, c. 1925.
John Dale, aged about forty, c. 1927.
Louis Esson, aged about forty-three, c. 1922.
Louis Esson, caricature by Hal Gye, c. 1927.
Nettie Palmer, at Kalorama, c. 1933.
Vance Palmer, at Kalorama, c. 1935.
Frank Dalby Davison, at Military Road, Rose Bay, c. 1928.
Dymphna Cusack, 1945.
Katharine Susannah Prichard, c. 1940.

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Acknowledgements

A NUMBER OF PEOPLE have made crucial contributions to this book. My primary resource in reconstructing the lives of Louis and Hilda Esson has been the letters and personal records left by them, and by others who knew them. I have had a great deal of help with this detective work from the staffs of libraries in Australia and overseas, in particular from that of the National Library in Canberra; the details and extent of my debt in this respect will be clear from the note on sources which precedes the select bibliography at the end of the book. I have been appreciative, too, of the generosity of those who agreed to be interviewed in the course of my research.

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Four other people have been particularly important in its preparation. I had been interested in Louis Esson's plays for a long time, but it was Dr Angela O'Brien, in the course of her research on the history of New Theatre in Melbourne, who first made me aware of the richness of Hilda Esson's life and work. In writing the book, I have always been indebted to the constructive criticism of my wife, Dr Gay Baldwin; hers was a contribution that I think I could never measure or define. Finally, I am especially grateful to Hugh and Marjorie Esson for their ready co-operation at every stage of the project. Hugh, my principal witness, remembered a great deal, and was unfailingly kind and judicious in his response to this intrusion into his parents' lives.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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It is fair that the reader should expect one other kind of acknowledgement, and that is a declaration of my own interest. No matter how much biographers try to be self-effacing, they can never claim complete objectivity, and the story will necessarily reflect personal emphases which are not stated in the narrative. Another biographer might produce lives of Louis and Hilda Esson which look very different, and had my two subjects chosen to tell their own stories, it is likely that they would have taken quite another shape.

For me, as a writer who has always been interested in the ways in which theatre is made and the difficulties that face the people who make it, the myth of Louis Esson and the Pioneer Players has always been fascinating. This was my starting-point. Increasingly, though, the subject came to have wider cultural and personal interests. The Essons' Australia was the Australia of my parents and grandparents; I knew enough of it, at first or second hand, to have a stake in its distinctive social and intellectual patterns, and in their imaginative reconstruction. The tensions between pride in the culture and defensive disparagement of it, and between conceptions of high and popular culture, were as central in the iconography of the times as they are in more complicated ways today. The dynamics of the relationship between Louis and Hilda similarly had a powerful appeal as a subject for reasons that seemed at once historical and contemporary. Some of the central motives and conflicts of the Essons' emotional lives were directed by understandings of what marriage meant, and what roles were appropriate for men and women, which have been radically reshaped in our own time. But other elements of their dealings with each other reflect the kinds of passions and pressures which seem permanently part of the complexity of close relationships.

This book looks at Louis and Hilda Esson not only as individuals, each with strong claims to be the star of their own show, but as a double act, with great potential to be creative and destructive. In seeking to bring them both to a life which is recognizable as their own, it also seeks to make their lives recognizable in terms of the Australian culture of the first half of the century which shaped them, and that they helped to shape.

Peter Fitzpatrick
Melbourne