

“Walter Joseph Regis Kirby” Biography

From the SHC Archives

Walter Joseph Regis Kirby (1874 – 1934)

Walter Kirby attended the Marist Brothers’ Sacred Heart School at the corner of Pitt Street and Wellington Street. He was only eight (although two separate newspapers reported that he was six) when his singing career took off. His voice, as described in the Auckland Star in 1885, “is a phenomenal organ of purity and sweetness, and reaches notes that might excite the envy of many of our sopranos”.

Walter’s mother died when he was an infant and his father, a politician and contractor, passed away while he was still a boy. Walter’s eldest sister, who was a choir leader at St Patrick’s Cathedral, cared for him and devoted herself to his musical education.

Walter left for Melbourne at the age of 11 for further training under the famous Signor Cecci. He became known as the “Auckland boy soprano” and created a furore through his singing. According to one reviewer, he had “a voice far above the average and not only a pleasure, but a privilege to listen to”. He developed into a fine tenor, performing with the Melbourne, Metropolitan, Geelong and Ballarat Liedertafels, Albury Exhibition, Ballarat Exhibition and many other important engagements.

Walter returned to New Zealand in 1899 and arranged splendid programmes in various places, including Auckland, Wanganui, Hawkes Bay, Thames, Ohinemuri, Taranaki, Wellington, Napier, and Palmerston North. He always drew a crowded house.

Walter returned to Australia in 1902 and touring with Madam Trebelli, the great prima donna, his reputation became “high rank”. This led to opportunities in England and Europe. He spent six years in Italy, and finished his oratorio in London under Rendegger.

With this wonderful musical experience, he returned to Australia in 1910 and entertained music lovers with songs he sang in English, Italian, French and German. In a newspaper article soon after his arrival in Australia, he commented sagely: “The people have been good enough to say I have one of the finest tenor voices in the world, I discovered on arrival in London that it was not everything to possess a good voice: that no stranger could succeed without capital and that no voice was developed without influence.” Although he was expected to return to Europe the following year, he remained in Australia until 1930, before returning to London to reside.

He passed away after a short illness in a London nursing home on 5 December 1934. Being of a generous heart, he made bequests to Melbourne and Auckland Universities for annual singing scholarships, to religious charities, Sacred Heart College and the Marist Brothers College.