

# THE MCDONAGH SISTERS

## FACT SHEET



Scene from 'Those who love', the first film by the McDonagh sisters

**The three sisters, Isabel, Phyllis and Paulette McDonagh were pioneers in Australian cinema. They formed their own film company and made four feature movies together: *Those who love* (1926), *The Far Paradise* (1928), *The Cheaters* (1930) and *Two Minutes Silence* (1932/1934). During the 1920s the McDonagh family lived at *Drummoyne House*, which provided the lavish interiors for most of their films.**

### Their First Film: *Those Who Love*

Their first feature film, *Those Who Love*, was a social drama, showing class distinctions and family loyalties coming between the heroine and the hero. J.C. Williamson distributed the film and at its premiere in Sydney on 11 December 1926, it was publicly and professionally acclaimed. The critics praised the story, sets, acting and costumes as well as the fact that the budget had been so small.

### The McDonagh Sisters

Isabel (1899-1982), Phyllis (1900-1978) and Paulette (1901-1978) McDonagh were the eldest of seven children of John and Anita McDonagh of Drummoyne. Their father was the honorary doctor to the J. C. Williamson theatrical empire so the girls grew up in the world of show business.

The McDonagh sisters eventually decided to try their luck in film production and went on to become an influential artistic force in the Australian film industry in the late 1920s. Paulette assumed principal directing and writing duties, Phyllis worked in the role of producer and art director, and Isabel



Paulette McDonagh in the director's chair

acted under the stage name of Marie Lorraine. With their independent spirit, they were undaunted by a film industry dominated by men and by America.



Scene from 'Those who love', the first film by the McDonagh sisters

Originally comprising some 1800 metres of footage, *Those Who Love* was produced on a budget of £1000 and filmed in ten days. It was not generally known that the palatial *Drummoyne House*, which provided the lavish interiors for the film, was the McDonagh sisters' family home. Sadly, little of the film has survived to the present, however, in 1986, two minutes of the film was purchased by the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra.

## More Films by the McDonagh Sisters

With the profits from *Those Who Love*, the sisters embarked on *The Far Paradise* (1928), another society drama. *Smith's Weekly* wrote: 'This picture has a smoothness and finish rare in Australian films; apparently the sisters have realised that America has developed the technique of production to a fine art, and have been willing to learn.'



James Carson (*Gaston Mervale*), Karl Rossi (*Arthur McLaglen*) and Cherry Carson (*Marie Lorraine*) in a scene from 'The Far Paradise'.

Their third film, *The Cheaters*, was completed as a silent film in 1929. It is about an embezzler, who seeks revenge on the person who turned him in twenty years earlier. The incomplete Sydney Harbour Bridge is used as a backdrop for many scenes and special effects were used to show the completed bridge. Since there were no immediate offers of release, the sisters later incorporated some talking scenes to try to improve the commercial potential of the film. These additional scenes were filmed in Melbourne in the *Hotel Australia* and the popular nightclub, *Ambassadors*. Although none of these scenes has survived, they included a fancy dress party sequence and a romantic interlude in which Isabel (alias Marie Lorraine) sings to her lover.

The sisters' final film was their most daring. Based on a successful play, *Two Minutes Silence* (1933), was a stark anti-war drama set in London on Armistice Day. Paulette believed this to be the sisters' best film and she considered the mediocre response of the Australian audiences to mean that it was largely misunderstood. It was the first Australian sound feature to explore a serious social issue and at the time was avant-garde.



Marie Lorraine as Cherry Carson in a still from 'The Far Paradise', 1928

## Drummoyne House

*Drummoyne House*, which gave its name to the suburb, was built as a home for successful merchant and trader William Wright. Wright was born in Essex in 1807 and came to Australia with his wife Bethia in 1838. He made his fortune trading in New Zealand kauri gum, a natural resin which was then used in the manufacture of varnishes.

In 1856 he retired and around that time built *Drummoyne House* which was named after a family estate in the west of Scotland. The building of the house is thought to have involved some 70 French artisans in the construction of its ornamental steps and balustrades. Beautiful and extensive gardens were established around *Drummoyne House*, overseen by a statue of the goddess *Flora*. The statue still exists and is preserved at City of Canada Bay Civic Centre.



*Drummoyne House*, 1860s, the family home of the McDonagh sisters, where many interior scenes of the films were shot.

Amongst Wright's friends was John Smith, first Professor of Chemistry and Experimental Physics at the University of Sydney and a pioneer in the field of photography. Consequently, *Drummoyne House* and gardens are well documented through a wonderful series of mid-nineteenth century photographs. *Drummoyne House* was demolished in 1971.

## Further information

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