

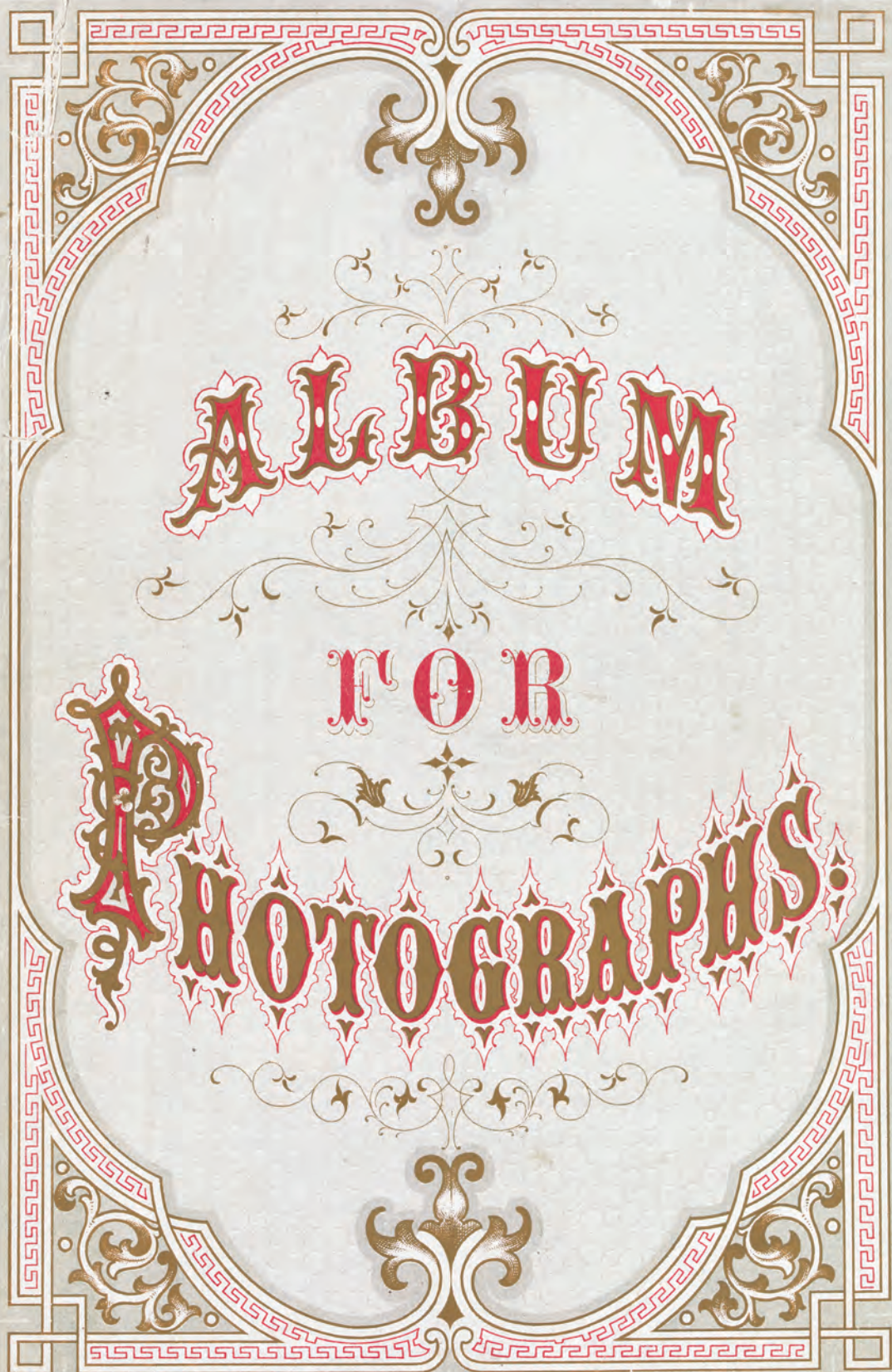
SIMON PLANT

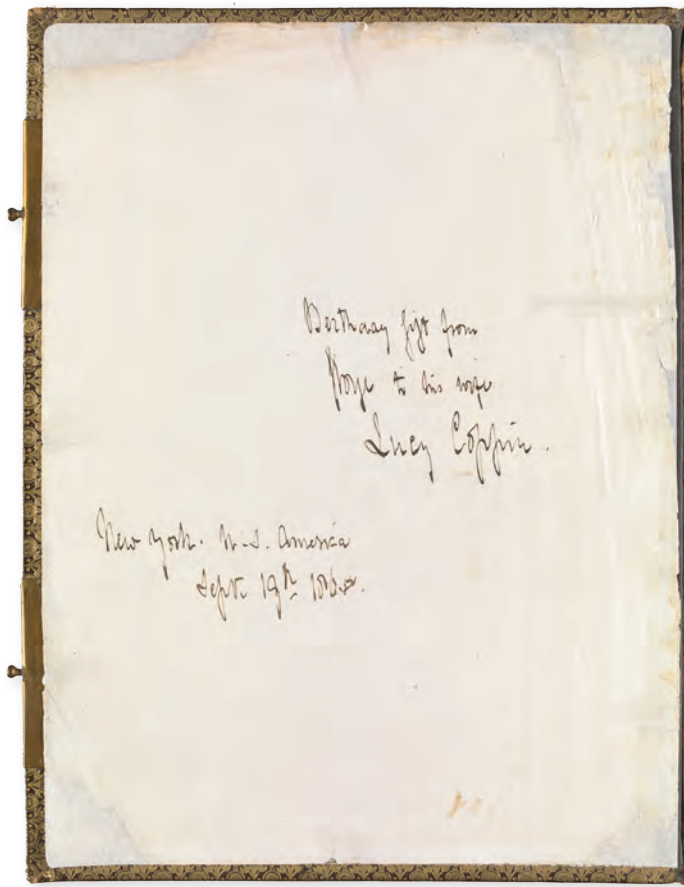
Mr Coppin's face book: an 1865 photograph album of celebrated people in America

A born showman, George Selth Coppin (1819–1906; see page 85) was always on the lookout for the next Big Thing.¹ An industrious mid-19th-century impresario, he owed much of his success as a comic actor and theatre manager to his entrepreneurial zeal – a quality which saw him make and lose several fortunes.² So when he toured the United States in 1865, presenting seasons of Shakespeare to American audiences after the Civil War, Coppin entered into various speculations.³ He contracted glassblowers at Barnum's American Museum in New York to perform in Australia.⁴ He purchased 'at least 100 pairs' of rollerskates from a Mr Plimpton, intending to build a rink in Melbourne.⁵ And he invested in soda-water fountains, hoping this venture would make him a 'large amount of money' at home.⁶

As America's summer turned to autumn, Coppin was ready to ship his acquisitions to Australia – a journey of some 16,000 kilometres – but among the '5 boxes and one parcel'⁷ winched aboard the steamer *Coringa* there was one other item: a 'large Album containing Photographs' of 'celebrated people in America' inscribed on the title page with his own handwritten dedication: 'Birthday gift from George to his wife Lucy Coppin. New York. U.S. America Sept 19, 1865' (see page 74). 'There are about 40 blanks in the album', he advised Lucy, 'but you will see some Photographs in a packet to fill them up with'.⁸

Opposite: 'Album of American military portraits, presidents and performers', album containing 193 photographic prints on carte-de-visite mounts: albumen silver, some hand-coloured, 1865, George Selth Coppin, Papers, 1814–1965, Manuscripts Collection, MS8827/13/PHO506. Photographs in this article, except for page 85, are from this album.

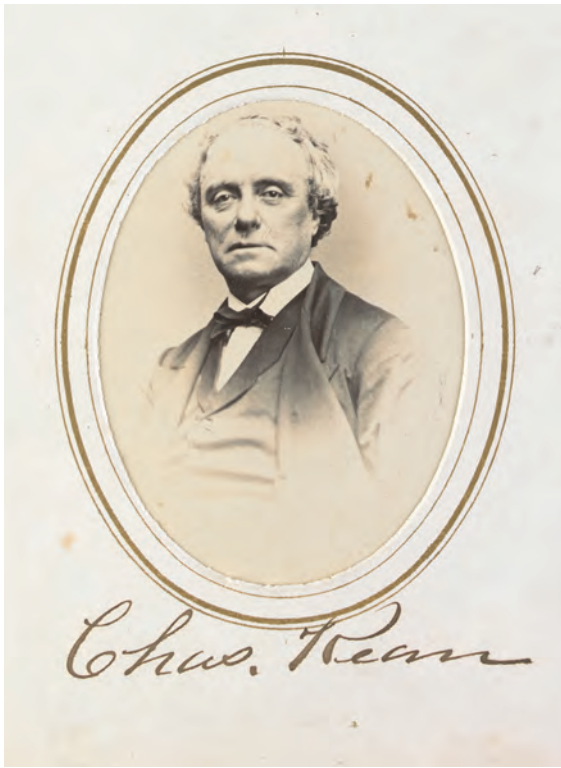




'Album of American military portraits, presidents and performers', 1865, inside front cover, George Selth Coppin, Papers, 1814–1965, Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS8827/13/PHO506

There were 200 photographic portraits, to be exact, the vast majority taken by professional photographer Charles DeForest Fredricks (1823–94). Fredricks' Photographic Temple of Art, at 585–87 Broadway, directly opposite the Metropolitan Hotel, where Coppin stayed, was the largest and most stylish photographic gallery in the city. It was also one of the most advanced, an early adopter of the four-lens camera capable of making multiple negatives from one full-sized plate. During the mid-1860s, the studio was generating huge numbers of small photographic portraits on paper and sizing them to the shape of a stiff card measuring roughly 90 by 50 millimetres. These inexpensive visiting cards, known as *cartes de visite*, were exchanged between families and friends for their own collections, but their popularity was not only confined to the domestic sphere.⁹

Alert to brisk sales of British royal portraits, American photographers such as Fredricks, Napoleon Sarony and Mathew Brady turned their lenses on 'the famous of the day' – military leaders, politicians, authors, actors – and



Left: Charles Kean. Right: Ellen Kean.

capitalised on their images. Soon, there was a ‘deluge of portraits of public characters ... piled by the bushel in the print stores’ and swapped feverishly.¹⁰ One writer observed in 1865, ‘The universality of the *carte-de-visite* has had the effect of making the public acquainted with all its remarkable men. We know their personality long before we see them’.¹¹

Coppin was caught up in this craze¹² as he toured America in 1864–65 with Charles Kean (1811–68) and Ellen Kean (1805–80), two eminent classical English actors he had already presented in Australia.¹³ The photographic prints he collected were souvenirs of his arduous travels, celebrating people he either met (showman Phineas T Barnum, Shakespeare scholar James H Hackett), saw at close quarters (actor Edwin Booth, high-wire walker Harry Leslie) or admired from afar (composer Giuseppe Verdi, newspaperman Horace Greeley).

Portraits from the world of entertainment account for about a third of Coppin’s album, and, viewed together, they present a virtual Who’s Who of power, influence and fame on Broadway in the mid-1860s. Here are Joseph Jefferson (the original Rip Van Winkle) and melodrama queen Adah Isaacs Menken, colossal tragedian Edwin Forrest and leading lady Agnes Robertson, beloved comic John E Owens and mutton-chopped character actor EA Sothern. Here too are the all-powerful theatre grandees (Lester Wallack, William

Wheatley), the uptown entertainers (Madame Ponisi, Signor Donati) and the downtown favourites (conjurer Robert Heller and acrobat William Hanlon, blackface minstrel Dan Bryant and the brothers Davenport, who summoned up spirits at seances). Even actress Laura Keane, who cradled President Abraham Lincoln in his dying moments at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC, is included, along with the man who fired the fatal shot that terrible night: actor John Wilkes Booth.

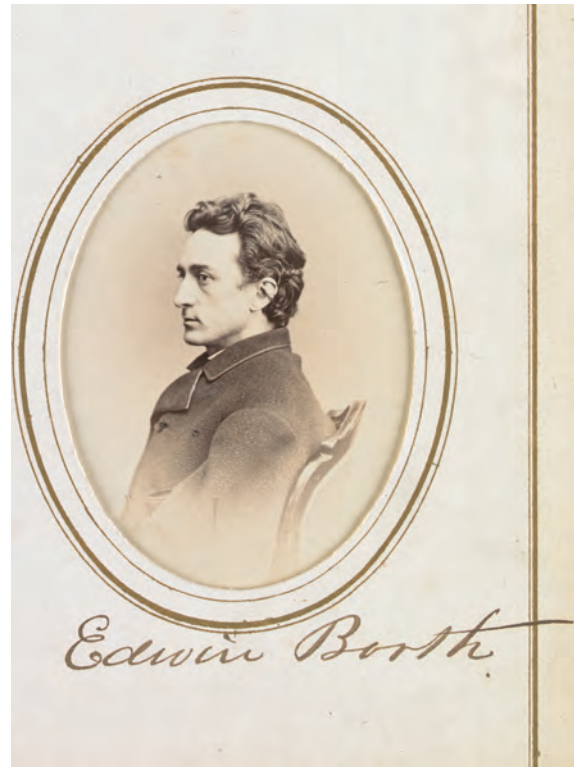
Heroes and villains: Coppin made no moral distinctions, evidently inclined to widen the lens and convey America's dazzling multiplicity. He found a fitting receptacle for his portraits: a handsome carte-de-visite photograph album bound in brown morocco, fastened with brass clasps and embossed with 'chromolithographic page decorations'.¹⁴ 'It is the best I could obtain', he told Lucy in a letter.¹⁵ And more than 150 years after it was assembled, Coppin's 1865 'Album of American military portraits, presidents and performers' (to quote its official title) presents as a unique 'face book', a portal into American fame and infamy at a momentous time in the life of a horribly fractured nation.¹⁶

The widow of Alec Bagot, Coppin's biographer, donated the album to State Library Victoria¹⁷, which also holds diaries, journals and letters associated with Coppin's travels. However, the album appears to have been largely overlooked by historians.¹⁸ Only now, having been cleaned and stabilised for the Library's collection, can the book's beguiling images be revisited. The 50-page album at present holds 193 photographic prints, 4 portraits per page. Many of the portraits have handwritten captions underneath, and a few are inscribed on the back, but it is not clear whose hand is responsible. Fresh scrutiny allows us to accurately identify more of the sitters, gives us new insights into Coppin's fixations and finances, and deep etches the contours of a truly remarkable Victorian-era journey.

Making a scene

Mr and Mrs Charles Kean were the very definition of British theatre royalty. The husband-and-wife duo had, for decades, staged lavish productions of Shakespeare on both sides of the Atlantic and were renowned for setting the Bard's history plays in their proper time period with elaborate scenery and costumes.

The Keans' fourth – and final – American tour included two Broadway seasons, in April–May and August–September 1865, but Manhattan was just one part of a larger tour traversing the west coast and eastern seaboard. Departing Sydney on 9 July 1864, the Kean company and manager Coppin



Left: CD Fredricks & Co. Theatrical Portrait Gallery No. 1. Right: Edwin Booth.

made landfall in San Francisco on 1 October 1864 – in the heat of a presidential election campaign – but, while regally received, they only played to modest houses in California. Undeterred, Coppin went on ahead to make arrangements for a farewell season in New York. He got his first view of America's biggest, tallest city from the bow of a ship. But if Coppin's heart soared at the sight of its buildings and harbour, he gave nothing away. His diary entry for 7 March 1865 simply stated, 'Arrived in New York at 10 o'clock'.¹⁹

Having battled his way through customs on the Battery,²⁰ in Lower Manhattan, Coppin headed straight up town, past colonial-era houses and churches, department stores and museums, and into the entertainment district clustered along Broadway above Canal Street. He was on a mission to find a respectable venue for the Keans, who were stopping in the Caribbean for three weeks, and left his calling card at four preferred theatres: the Academy of Music, Wallack's, Niblo's Garden and the Winter Garden. The Civil War was entering its final phase at this time, and with the Union on the brink of victory, public amusements were booming. Healthy advance bookings blocked Coppin at every turn, as he noted in a letter home:

The Academy is let for the nights he [Kean] wishes to act. Niblos [*sic*] theatre will not receive him. Nor Wallacks [*sic*]. There are only two [other] small



Left: Matilda Vining Wood. Right: James H Hackett.

theatres to visit ... and as I think they will not give him the terms, it will be certain that New York is closed against us.²¹

The Winter Garden was co-managed by William Stuart and the charismatic American actor Edwin Booth (1833–93; see page 77). Booth, at the time, was nearing the end of a then-record-breaking 100-night run of *Hamlet*. Booth's last performance as Hamlet was set for 22 March 1865, but Stuart regretted 'he could not make arrangements' to accommodate the ageing Kean afterwards.²² Anti-English feeling hardened this stage-door resistance. Britain was perceived to have sympathised with the soon-to-be-defeated South. His options narrowing, Coppin approached the Olympic, a 'great comedy house' managed by Matilda Vining Wood (1831–1915). Mrs John Wood, as she was universally known, was a talented English comedian and manager, and she turned Coppin down, preferring to present burlesque. This subversive new genre spoofed popular plays and prestigious stage fare by combining travesty and pantomime. Nothing was more parodied at the time than Shakespeare.

In more sedate circles, the Bard's plays were still reverently received, and James H Hackett (1800–71) did more than anyone to champion them. In January 1865, this actor turned theatre scholar gave readings based on his book, *Notes and Comments upon Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare*, at the Broadway



Left: Edwin Forrest. Right: John E Owens

Athenaeum. He gave Coppin an autographed copy when the two men met in early April, and they are almost sure to have discussed their respective campaigns to honour Shakespeare's tercentenary.²³ Booming, barrel-chested actor Edwin Forrest (1806–72) was another Shakespeare advocate in pre-Civil War America,²⁴ but Edwin Booth's star power, peaking in 1865, drew bigger audiences.

Booth, the handsome scion of a famous acting dynasty,²⁵ had toured Australia with Laura Keane in 1854. That trip proved to be an inebriated misadventure. Ten years on, the more mature Booth was earning plaudits for his 'fresh, exultant vigour'²⁶ and outshining his younger brother, John Wilkes, in the acting stakes. On 25 November 1864, all three brothers were on the same stage performing *Julius Caesar*.²⁷ The one-night benefit sought to raise funds for a statue of Shakespeare in Central Park. James Hackett had officiated at the foundation-stone laying on 23 April 1864 (the 300th anniversary of the Bard's birth). One day after *Julius Caesar*, Edwin began his record-breaking run of *Hamlet*. New York critics thought his 'melancholy aspect of countenance'²⁸ suited Shakespeare's troubled Danish prince, and photographs of a lank-haired, doe-eyed Booth confirm it. Coppin sounded a lone note of disapproval: 'Wednesday, March 8. Went to Winter Garden at night. Booth as Hamlet – not good'.²⁹

Coppin's last resort was the Broadway Theatre, but this modest playhouse, unfashionably near Canal Street, was thriving with a melodrama titled *The People's Lawyer*. Would its star, John E Owens (1823–86; see page 79), make way for the Keans? This question must have agitated Coppin as he was ushered into Fredricks' Photographic Temple of Art. Fatigue surrounds the mid-length portrait taken of him there. Deep bags hang under his eyes, his hair has not seen a comb in days, and his partially unbuttoned waistcoat suggests haste. Photographed side on, Coppin declined the use of theatrical props: no pedestals, curtains or books for the visitor from Australia. More significantly, he refused to smile. Normally, he would have done so – his whole career as a low comedian was about provoking laughter by playing the buffoon – but, not being a household name in New York, he knew he needed to win over theatre managers with a sturdy, steadfast image. So, as Fredricks's camera clicked, Coppin gazed into the middle distance and set his full lips in a hyphen as if to say, 'Here I am, a man of his word. A man of the world'.

This unhappy country

It is miserable to be ... alone in New York ... and reading the newspapers makes it more melancholy, for they are filled with nothing but the frightful accounts of the cruel war that is now carried out in this unhappy country.

– George Coppin to Lucy Coppin, New York, 30 March 1865

Coppin was not entirely alone. Managing to secure a berth for Charles and Ellen Kean at New York's Broadway Theatre 10 days before they were due to arrive from Havana, he had time on his hands to see many of the city's attractions for himself. 'During the day, I walk down to the Post Office', he told Lucy, then 'go round to the booksellers'.³⁰ Ever curious, Coppin logged visits as well to lecture theatres, a skating saloon,³¹ even a Russian bath house: 'not because I had the gout but to see what it was like'.³²

Come sundown, Coppin often stepped out with a British theatrical agent named Dr EP Hingston (c. 1823–76) – 'the companion and agent' of American humourist Artemus Ward³³ – and enjoyed the city's oyster bars.³⁴ He also took in a number of Broadway shows. Coppin, an astute judge of talent, rated Heller the conjurer 'very good'³⁵ and a downtown circus 'very bad'.³⁶ Daniel Bandmann, a German-American Shakespearean actor playing Shylock at Niblo's, was 'wretched'.³⁷ Idling in the Bowery, a down-at-heel patch of Lower Manhattan, Coppin enjoyed popular blackface-minstrel shows and struck up a friendship with the Bryant brothers Dan (1833–75) and Neil (1835–1902; see page 81).³⁸ These accomplished comics and musicians specialised in pro-Union



Left: Neil Bryant. Right: PT Barnum.

melodies and plantation-era skits that sent up ethnic customs. Coppin not only dined with the Bryants; he caroused with them after hours.

Phineas T Barnum's American Museum was one of Coppin's favourite destinations. Having called in on his second day in New York, 8 March, he returned at least three times that month (10, 14 and 28 March) and 'visited the Museum often' after that, 'noting carefully in his diary sundry stage tricks, mechanics and human oddities or divertissements that appealed to his observant eye'.³⁹ On the hectic corner of Broadway and Ann Street, this five-storey department store of amusements hosted 'over one million curiosities' in a hodgepodge of ascending saloons and exhibition rooms. Having managed his own amusement park in Melbourne, the Cremorne Gardens by the Yarra River at Richmond, Coppin relished the eccentricity of Barnum's museum, singing the praises of its box-kite banner, its 'pseudo giant' and its 'very funny' 'three leg'd dancer'.⁴⁰ Much like his carte-de-visite photograph album, everything on show at Barnum's – the wondrous, the peculiar, the fake – was haphazardly commingled. PT Barnum (1810–91) himself was the biggest attraction, and the portrait of the garrulous Yankee in Coppin's album conveys some of his twinkly-eyed vim and vigour. They met in early March, the encounter yielding an invitation for the Australian to tour the pint-sized performer General Tom Thumb, aka Charles Sherwood Stratton (1838–83).

Barnum and Coppin are also likely to have discussed politics – the American promoter was standing for election in Connecticut at the time – and tactics for securing favourable press coverage. ‘I have spent a lot of money with the gentlemen of the newspapers to get him [Kean] good articles’, Coppin reported.⁴¹ But on arrival in New York, on 29 March 1865, an irritable Kean was in ‘a great stew’ about an ‘unfriendly article’⁴² and accused his Australian agent of being ‘incompetent’. Coppin held his tongue, confiding to Lucy, ‘If it had not been for you and the children, I should have walked out of the room and left him altogether’.⁴³

It had been an unlikely alliance from the beginning. Born eight years apart, Coppin and Kean were separated by class, education and temperament, one the son of a celebrated English tragedian and schooled at Eton, the other the child of strolling players who was tutored in village day schools. When Coppin was struggling to establish himself in the Antipodes as a budding theatre manager, Kean was managing the Princess’s Theatre near Oxford Circus. By the mid-1850s, Kean was so admired that Queen Victoria appointed him ‘manager of the Christmas theatricals’ at Windsor Castle. In short, these men occupied different worlds, until a dash for cash brought them together. Kean’s insistence on elaborate sets and costumes had strained the finances of his London company. Eager to secure funds for a comfortable retirement, he had agreed to an Australasian tour in 1863–64 managed by Coppin, who was himself deep in debt. Events had conspired against them, however, and the tour had barely broken even.⁴⁴

Pressing on to California, and then New York, actor and manager had traded barbs all the way, against a background of improving news for the Union side. ‘The town [New York] is drunk with excitement’, Kean wrote after hearing that Confederate forces had been routed at Richmond.⁴⁵ Six days later, Coppin noted ‘news of [General] Lee’s surrender’ at Appomattox.⁴⁶ The warring thespians suspended hostilities on 13 April 1865, when they jointly hosted a dinner in New York for ‘the press people’.⁴⁷ The following evening (Good Friday), President Lincoln and Mrs Mary Todd Lincoln left the White House to attend a comedy at Ford’s Theatre.⁴⁸

Acting his age

The President died yesterday at 7 o’clock and I never saw such a change in the appearance of a city. All the stores and public buildings [in New York] decorated with flags to celebrate the taking of Richmond ... were lowered to half mast. Many people crying.

– George Coppin to Lucy Coppin, New York, 16 April 1865



Left: John Wilkes Booth. Right: Harry Leslie.

The assassination of President Lincoln brought America to a standstill. Broadway theatres were shuttered for more than a week, and on the day of his giant funeral procession in Manhattan, the greatest its citizens had ever witnessed, only Barnum's American Museum was open for business.⁴⁹ But, as a stunned nation mourned Lincoln's passing, and the assassin, John Wilkes Booth, Edwin Booth's younger brother, was hunted down and shot in Virginia, Coppin shuttled back and forth between New York and Baltimore, trying to salvage an itinerary upended by the terrible events in the capital.⁵⁰

'The horrible deed having been perpetrated by an actor, there will no doubt be a very strong feeling with the public against all actors', Coppin predicted.⁵¹ He was wrong. Mr and Mrs Kean were rapturously received by New Yorkers in April and May, the ovations growing louder in the autumn as critics applauded their 'original, powerful and admirable' performances.⁵² Between engagements in Gotham, the English tragedians undertook a grand summer tour, boarding locomotives to reach blazing-hot theatres in seven eastern US states and one Canadian province.⁵³ Pausing in Buffalo, Coppin took time out to see Niagara Falls ('a wonderful sight') and held his breath when daredevil aerialist Harry Leslie soared high above its foaming waters 'upon a little rope'. 'I felt quite sick when I saw him', he admitted. 'An extra puff [of wind] might have caused him to loose [*sic*] his balance and then there was nothing but certain death.'⁵⁴

Coppin was in Boston in early October, when the *Coringa* sailed with his photograph album. Two weeks later, after farewelling the Keans in Philadelphia, he boarded the RMS *Persia* in New York, bound for Liverpool. As it crossed the Atlantic, a 'heartsick' Coppin had time to reflect on a journey that had made him pots of money.⁵⁵ Not only that: in the course of nearly 18 months, he had put Shakespeare on Broadway, witnessed the funeral of an American president, done deals with America's greatest showman and partied with minstrels. Quite a performance.

Back in Melbourne in early January 1866, Coppin enjoyed a hero's welcome. At a 'complimentary dinner' at the Criterion Hotel, 80 friends hailed him as Australia's great 'promoter of the drama, an institution which he had done more to elevate than perhaps any other man in the colony'.⁵⁶ Coppin answered these salutations with notes on North America, repeating insights into train networks, agricultural machinery and Freemasonry which he had already retailed to a wider audience through his Melbourne *Herald* reports. *Coppin in California*, a farce inspired by his American adventures, was not the big hit he predicted, but, having travelled round the world, its author positioned himself as a well-informed 'observer of men, manners, customs and the passing events'.⁵⁷

For proof of Coppin's cosmopolitan connections, one had only to inspect his carte-de-visite album from America. 'When they [the portraits] arrive, you have [*sic*] better take the things out and air them', he had advised Lucy from New York.⁵⁸ We do not know if she did, but the order in which Coppin's 'celebrity cartes' were eventually arranged – dignitaries first, entertainers second, men before women – suggests he personalised it. Many of the captions, written in the spidery style characteristic of his journal jottings, seem to confirm it. Coppin's own portrait is positioned right up front, but in some ways it presents a misleading impression (see page 85). The haggard traveller photographed 10 months earlier at Charles D Fredricks's studio was a different man now, having lost weight, shaken off his 'old enemy' gout and had been reunited with his young family. Coppin was back on his feet as a public figure, too: performing again, managing theatres and plotting the resumption of his parliamentary career.

'This is a strange country', he said of the United States, in a letter home during the dog days of July 1865.⁵⁹ But America, it turned out, was the making of George Coppin. Charles Kean was dead within three years, his po-faced portrait a faint memory of a man who once strode stages in London and New York. Mrs Kean, devastated by her husband's death, retired from the stage and died in 1880.

Coppin prospered for another 35 years, applying his prodigious energies to everything from the St John Ambulance and post office savings banks to a resort on the Mornington Peninsula. Who knows? Perhaps in old age, Coppin opened up that album of celebrated Americans, gazed upon its sepia-tinted cast of decadents and divinities, and wondered how he had ever travelled so far.



Charles D Fredricks, Portrait of George Coppin, New York, March 1865, George Selth Coppin, Papers, 1814–1965, Manuscripts Collection, MS8827/13/PHO217