

You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone

The life and work of Eric Morecambe



Gary Morecambe

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«HarperCollins»

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You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone: The life and work of Eric Morecambe
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To mark the 25th anniversary of Eric Morecambe's death, *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone* is the first book to cover Eric's whole life and untimely death, including unseen family photographs and new insights by Eric's son Gary Morecambe. Published in the 25th anniversary year of Eric Morecambe's death, *You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone* is a celebration of Eric Morecambe's life in words and previously unseen personal family photographs. Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise are to this day still regarded as Britain's most successful and best loved comedy duo, and their television shows from the 1970's and 80's are undoubtedly their finest work. For the first time, Eric Morecambe's whole life, from his earliest days in his home-town of Morecambe right up to his death in Gloucestershire in 1984 are appraised by his son Gary. Included are photographs not seen by the family until recently – poignantly one of Eric at a friend's wedding the day before he would collapse and die on stage. As the final and definitive book on Eric Morecambe, *You'll Miss Me* features interviews with those who knew and loved Eric, including his wife Joan, Ronnie Corbett, Hamish McColl who wrote and starred in *The Play What I Wrote* and a foreword by Judi Dench. 'You'll miss me when I'm gone' was Eric's oft repeated plaintive remark when he'd been annoying the Morecambe family with his gags. The irony is that, 25 years after his death, the viewing nation still misses Eric Morecambe.

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You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone
A Celebration of the Life and Work of Eric Morecambe
GARY MORECAMBE



HarperCollinsPublishers

For my mother, Joan, because I've never taken the time to say thank you for everything.

In memory of my friend and former colleague Eddie Waters who died suddenly this year.

'I remain one thing and one thing only, and that is a clown. It places me on a far higher plane than any politician.' Charlie Chaplin

'It takes courage and openness to achieve authenticity—to be able to say to yourself and to the world, "Like it or not, this is who I am," and then to live that truth.'

DAN MILLMAN

'[Morecambe and Wise are] the greatest double act in the history of British television.' THE INDEPENDENT

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Foreword

by Dame Judi Dench OBE

Like everybody else, I was completely bewitched by *The Morecambe and Wise Show*. It was the highlight of the week to watch and never to be missed. When the glorious moment came of being invited to appear on the show, I could not wait. I was SO excited! Among other things, we did Ernie's version of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. I remember Eric walking through the set of a foggy London with three legs! We laughed until we wept. He also kept calling me 'young man'. Eric and Ernie were the most amazing complement to each other.

My late husband, the actor Michael Williams, and I saw quite a lot of Eric afterwards and he often came to our house for a meal. The first time this happened, Eric asked me what was for dinner. When I told him it was salmon, he said he would just have the vegetables, and I thought it was a joke. It turned out that he really did not like salmon and did just eat the vegetables. The next time, he brought with him a whole salmon that he had caught himself—and still just had the vegetables!

Eric was genuinely funny, but never unkind with his humour. I still miss him and shall never forget him. This book, commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Eric's passing, is the most wonderful tribute to an extraordinary man.

DAME JUDI DENCH OBE

Letter from Ronnie Corbett OBE

Dear Gary, Of course I knew Eric very well indeed. We were both members of the Lord's Taverners at the same time, and of course saw each other quite a lot at their functions, and their dinners and their balls etc., and Joan and he were always a delight to bump into, and Joan remains so of course.

I probably didn't know Eric nearly as well as Ronnie B did, because I have been a South London boy, although I'm a Scotsman of course, but I have lived in South London all my life. Ronnie lived always up in the Hatch End area, and Eric also living North of London saw somewhat more of him I think; they even had dinners together at their homes, so Ron was more of an expert than me on him, but of course I am a huge admirer of Eric.

He still remains, doesn't he, in anything you read, top of the list at a time when comics were great, dear, clean and very funny, like Tommy Cooper, and Ken Dodd remains to this day. So Ronnie and I were existing in a very keenly expert world.

We were in no way competitive, because we were quite different. Eric and Ernie grew up together, they developed together. I think they may have known each other from being 14 or 15, whereas Ron and I didn't really come together until we were about 37, so there was not a spiritual coming together in the same way, which was an important difference, and a very classic fact.

Ron and I were brought together as two single artists, who got on well and worked very, very comfortably together, and enjoyed it tremendously, but we weren't joined in the same way emotionally from teenage years as Eric and Ernie were, and I think it probably made for the crucial difference in our styles. Ron and I were both great admirers of Eric and Ernie. We often rehearsed in the same building, the Acton Hilton, and used to bump into each other now and again there. We rehearsed at different times, but we tended to start a bit earlier in the day I think, and they went on a little bit later, and if I remember correctly, we drove ourselves, and Eric and Ernie were very often chauffeured. A mild distinction I daresay.

As far as being socially funny, Eric was wondrous. In company he was absolutely sparkingly contemporarily original. He couldn't help himself in a way, and I often wondered if there was a strain which eventually took its toll.

He wasn't one, I do remember, to stand up and say much on his own, because of course he did miss Ernie if they weren't together, because he felt he had someone to lean on, or someone to refer to, so he wasn't that sort of animal, but as you sat at a dinner table, or mingled with a few drinks before dinner, he sparkled, and he was the most winning of people in company.

I can't say more really. It's fantastic that they still remain at the top of any journalist's list of funny people now and in days gone by. God bless him.

RONNIE CORBETT OBE

12 June 2008

PART ONE: Remembering Eric

This Boy's a Fool

INTERVIEWER: Some say you never mix socially. Is this true?

ERIC: It is true, and it isn't true. The point is, if we have to mix socially we will. If we don't, we don't. That's what has helped to keep us together such a long time.

ERNIE: People seem to think the image extends from the stage...like Laurel and Hardy.

This almost certainly being the last book I will ever write on my father, Eric Morecambe, I want to put down a few words about the man from a personal standpoint.

A family Sunday lunch conversation was taking place in the Morecambe household circa 1970. We were discussing, in far from dulcet tones, as was the way when my father was about, various ideas he had for his next Christmas show. Not unnaturally we were all eager to chip in with our own ideas. Finally, beneath the hum of voices, my father, in his familiarly loud tones said, 'Be quiet, everyone. Gary's got something to say, and every now and then it can be interesting!'

I cannot recall for the life of me what I then suggested that long-ago day, but hopefully this book—commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the great man's passing—is the 'now and then' when I can be interesting.

Some observers of past books to do with family relationships where fame is present, including one publication of my own, appear to misunderstand the whole concept of consigning to print the personal experiences and events of their life around that fame. Friend and erstwhile colleague, the late Michael Sellers, son of one of my own personal heroes, Peter Sellers, wrote a very compelling biography of his father in the early eighties called *PS: I Love You*. At the time he was put under a lot of pressure for having made 'slandorous' comments about his father and generally trawling for dirt—neither of which he did! He simply told the story in a very honest and balanced way. The misconception, therefore, is that the author is always out to trawl for dirt and not simply aiming to define the image of the parent of public interest as they, the author, experienced it.

Therefore, whatever you might read into my words, rest assured of one thing: Eric Morecambe is still my icon and the best father anyone could wish to have had.

Fortunately there is a big difference between Eric Morecambe and Peter Sellers when it comes to personalities, and I'm so very lucky that out of all the famous parents I might have had I got Eric! And it's not whingeing or dirttrawling when I try to give the complete image of the man. It is providing an accurate account (as accurate as one person's experiences and observations ever can be trusted to be) not only for his fans of today but also for those of future years.

As I say, I'm lucky because Eric was a thoroughly pleasant person to be around, who, in his own words, 'never knowingly set out to hurt anyone'. His shortcomings and doubts as a parent were more to do with the extraordinary circumstances of his chosen career and the fact that that career made him absent quite a bit, specifically in my sister's and my early years. Furthermore, it was an era when fathers were heard more than seen. In his case he wasn't heard that much either, because most of the parenting was left to my mother, owing mostly to those protracted absences. This must have made it difficult for him—and her, come to think of it. Yet he did manage to connect with us so well. The comedy performer's thing of touching the child within certainly is true: as soon as he was around there was little time wasted growing accustomed to who this man we called 'Dad' was. All at once he was just there, and joking around and communicating on our level.

‘Eric was a thoroughly pleasant person to be around, who, in his own words, “never knowingly set out to hurt anyone”.’

Occasionally he would act more seriously and there'd be the 'How's school going?' question. I liked those questions, not because he was genuinely interested, because he wasn't—it was an alien world for him and the wash of blankness over his face showed as much—but because he felt he *should* ask, and that was heartfelt and therefore warmly received.

I reflect on him as a performer who was absorbed by his work—a performer who saw his career as much more than a means to an end. This was probably detrimental to his health, but not to the extent claimed by certain documentaries, which casually gloss over the sixty fags a day and the ill-health he acquired working down the mines. But it is fair to state that his personality was not fully geared to the pressures that being on top of the comedy pile had in store. He

often claimed that being something just a little less than number one was best, because you had a great living without carrying the stress of public expectation. Having been in his company in public I would challenge that, as I got the impression that he very much enjoyed being number one. He certainly enjoyed being famous: a documentary by Jonathan Ross screened at Christmas 2007 confirmed as much when in a rare interview from the archives my father admitted to it without a moment's hesitation. In fact, he went on to say that he didn't believe other famous people when they said that they *didn't* enjoy it.

I also sense with my father that he saw his success as a stroke of luck—something that prevented him having to do an underpaid, mundane job for a living. I don't think I heard him ever knock his father, George, for spending a life working for the Corporation (local council), but equally he felt no urge to follow in his footsteps.

‘Fundamentally he just wanted to make us, his family, laugh and make the viewing public laugh too.’

I think, as we'll see from the words of his old friends from Lancashire, that Eric was a little unusual as a child: clearly gifted, yet sometimes remote when he chose to be. All these friends seemed to expect him to go on to great things as if it were a given. His sharp wit, inability to deal with responsibilities and major decisions, and a temperament which made it difficult for him to be tolerant of all that everyday life threw his way would all have been a part of him with or without the recognition and success that followed. However, I would say that the nature of his work added to any stress he felt and contributed to his momentary mood swings. But, as I write these words, I know that fundamentally he just wanted to make us, his family, laugh and make the viewing public laugh too. He was somehow beholden to that need to entertain because it had freed him from an ordinary background, yet in the act of embracing it he

became imprisoned by it. That's really all it came down to. All the other bits were just flighty little moments of everyday life—some days were good and fun and full of hilarity around the house, some days less so. All other expressions, desires and actions were hardly recognizable as anything more than minor character traits: there really wasn't that much there beyond entertaining—it totally defined him and was virtually all he was seeking from life.

What helped damage his health was the incongruity that being funny was not—and probably isn't for *any* comedian—delivered from a relaxed state of mind and body. As my mother once remarked, he could hardly sit down at the dinner table without having to get up and do something halfway through the meal. He was a bundle of nervous energy. This made him slightly contradictory, for while Morecambe and Wise was everything to him, he was also quite happy to point out clouds and make shapes from them, or to sit alone all day long on the river bank, surrendering to the moment and revelling in that childlike clarity of vision that was so much a part of his likeability.

People often approach me and say, 'You look just like your dad.' This I find very uplifting and flattering, for my brush-over grey-white hair makes me look much more like Ernie these days. Even friends and family remark about the similarity—to my father, that is, not Ernie. It's also friends and family who express a quiet concern that I spend too much time working on Morecambe and Wise-related projects and issues, to the detriment of other things, but I'm too old to change. And although I do other projects I never tire of the Morecambe and Wise ones—indeed I would dispense with all the rest in favour of these, because first and foremost I'm as much a fan of Eric and Ernie as I am Eric's son. I still sit at home and watch the DVDs, and amaze myself that I always laugh and laugh as much as ever. Some humour really is timeless.

It is summer 2008. While the birds twitter and the bees hum, and the man next door tries drowning them out with his lawnmower, I'm sitting at my computer writing the book you are now holding. I feel unbelievably excited. It's always the same. When it's to do with Morecambe and Wise I seem to ignite. This ignition is automatic, yet still I can't resist going through all my favourite

routines of theirs for an excess of inspiration. It's probably just an excuse to watch all their shows again. With the advent of YouTube I even spend my lunch break watching them getting up to mischief with the likes of John Lennon: I love the way he throws back his head in hysterics when Eric ad-libs. Then there's André Previn and his wonderful orchestra performing Grieg's Piano Concerto with Eric as soloist; Eric and Ernie 'backing' Tom Jones; Shirley Bassey having her shoe replaced with a workman's boot; Glenda Jackson in *that* Cleopatra sketch ('Sorry I'm late, but I've been irrigating the desert...not easy on your own!'); Eric and Ernie making breakfast to *The Stripper*; or their homage to Gene Kelly with their beautifully shot *Singin' in the Rain*. The list is endless.

It's the going back to the many magical moments of their television career that reminds me—should I need reminding—that they were absolute masters of comedy; and that they are not

just for ever but also inimitable. There is something dynamic and glittering about the two of them that prevents their work from tiring—something that goes beyond the fact they were mere comic entertainers providing light relief in an otherwise tragic world. Perhaps it is a combination of their wonderful talent as performers and the lost era from which they emerged. Arguably they are the last great ‘stars’ Britain produced—a legend that goes way beyond today’s vacuous notion of ‘celebrity’.

The novelist L. P. Hartley wrote: ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.’ Many are the times that this observation comes to mind, and more often than not it is when I’m thinking about the heyday of Morecambe and Wise, which is basically any year in the seventies. What is it about that decade—that cringe-worthy, decadent, crudely flamboyant, sexist, gaudy, tasteless time—that allowed Morecambe and Wise to reign supreme as the kings of British comedy? This was still the era of the suit-and-tie comedian—‘alternative comedy’ hadn’t even been thought of, let alone given that title, and if a performer had the temerity to appear on TV minus a tie or indeed a jacket, you sensed they wouldn’t be making too many more screen appearances, while simultaneously concluding they must have been dragged out of some working men’s club to ‘have a go’ on the box. Now we can look back from today’s current crop of comedy entertainers and the boot is firmly on the other foot, as we wonder: yes, Eric and Ernie were and for ever will be a remarkable comedy act, but why did they dress like second-hand-car salesmen?

***‘Eric is not only England’s most popular comedian,
he must be near to being our most popular person.’***

Author-playwright-novelist-lawyer the late John Mortimer wrote in 1983: ‘Eric is not only England’s most popular comedian, he must be near to being our most popular person.’

Which neatly sums up why, after fifty-two years on this planet, I still celebrate my father’s life and work in books such as this: frankly, there is a demand for him, and the fact that my father died suddenly mid-flow a quarter of a century ago has not remotely lessened the love for him felt by those who vividly remember the wonderful shows he and Ernie produced, and by others who are discovering them for the first time.

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