

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. — *St. Columbus, Queen Isabella, and St. Leo XIII.*

Annals from the Archives

Actress Maxine Elliott and Notre Dame



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Graduates of the NDA in Roxbury
1883-1885

In Center of Back Row

Jessie Dermott, aka Maxine Elliott

SND New England

Archives

2013.52

—It's always fun to come across strange and unexpected connections to the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. During the preparation for a recent article, I stumbled upon a *Boston Globe* article dated April 21, 1907. In it, the reporter discussed the origins of famed stage actress, Maxine Elliott (1868-1940). According to the *Globe*, Elliott attended the Notre Dame Academy in Roxbury. Printed with the article was an image of the students from the Academy. The picture looked familiar to me and after a short search through the graduation photographs from the Academy, sure enough, I found it in the collection. The portrait presented nine students who attended the Academy between 1883 and 1885. The *Globe* article stated that the picture was taken in 1883 and that Maxine Elliott, born Jessie Dermott, was standing in the center of the back row.

Taking a quick look through the student and boarder registers, I found listed as a boarder, Jessie Dermott. The register states that she entered the Academy in 1885, which seems to contradict the information in the article. However, the entry from the register was incomplete. While it included her home as Rockland, Maine, it didn't list her parents' names, nor mention her graduation as it did for other students. Perhaps 1885 was the date of graduation?

On the back of the photo were the names of six of the nine graduates—Elizabeth Johnson, Minnie White, Mabel Hammond, Isabel [Belle] Martins, Mary Finneran and Cora Hill. Luckily, the *Boston Globe* not only included those names, but filled in the identities of the last three students standing in the back row. From left to right are Lizzie Johnson, Jessie Dermott and Alice Perkins, all of whom are listed in the Roxbury register.

Biographies of Maxine Elliott from various sources, such as Wikipedia, the Internet Movie Database and Broadway Photos offer contradictory facts of Jessie Dermott's early life. Fortunately, her niece Diana Forbes-Robertson wrote a 1964 biography of her aunt, based on her memories and stories from her mother, Gertrude, who also became an actress and often performed with her sister. While the account of Jessie attending NDA in Roxbury was mentioned in Forbes-Robertson's book, she also stated that Jessie was seduced at the age of 15 by George MacDermott of New York City, who was more than a decade her senior. According to the biography, Jessie married him at the age of 16. That would have her leaving the Academy in 1883 or 1884, which could be possible. Whatever the truth, it does seem that Jessie married at a very young age, which was not uncommon during those years. Unfortunately, George MacDermott revealed himself to be extremely abusive and Jessie was forced to ultimately file for divorce in 1889. She finally managed to obtain the divorce in 1896.

Once she separated from her husband in 1889, Jessie wasted little time in pursuing her dream. Having lived in New York City for a few years, she soon found a room to rent. Next, she applied to enter an acting school run by actor-playwright Dion Boucicault. She had the fee and because she was beautiful, had no trouble in being accepted. Not long after, she adopted the stage name Maxine Elliott. One year later, in 1890, she had her first major role in *The Middleman*. After that success, she began a tour through the United States and Canada appearing in such plays as *A Woman of No Importance*, *A Fool's Paradise* and *A Professor's Love Story*. During those years, more than one critic declared her the most beautiful woman in the world, which only added to her fame. In the early 20th century, she began speculating on the stock market, was amazingly successful, and by 1907 became one of the richest and most famous actors in the U.S. She used that fame to open her own theater in 1908, *The Maxine Elliott Theater*, located near Broadway on 39th Street. She owned and operated the theater until 1920. In addition to the stage, she also appeared in five silent films between 1913 and 1919.

Maxine Elliott married Nat Goodwin, another a stage actor, but they also divorced. During her career, she was said to have been romantically involved with many famous men, including J. P. Morgan, baseball player, John Montgomery Ward, boxer, Jim Corbett and even King Edward VII. Around 1914, it was rumored that she planned on marrying again, this time to tennis player, Anthony Wilding, who was fifteen years her junior. But the war in Europe had begun and because she had so many friends in England, she hoped to find a way to help. She offered her Hartsbourne Manor, located in Hertfordshire, England to be used as a hospital for wounded soldiers. Her next move was to buy a barge which she originally thought could become a floating hospital. The barge was christened *Julia* in January of 1915. It eventually was used to bring in supplies for the Belgians when Germany invaded. Not long after, Anthony Wilding was killed in the Battle of Aubers Ridge. She poured her grief at his death into using her resources to feed and clothe over 350,000 people fleeing from the Germans. In May of 1916, she was forced to leave Belgium, but in gratitude for her work, King Albert of Belgium awarded her the medal of the Knight of the Order of the Crown.

In 1920, she retired from acting and moved to England, though she also had homes in the U.S. and in France. After her retirement from public life, Maxine Elliott entertained often. Among her many famous guests were Douglas Fairbanks Sr., and Winston Churchill. Maxine Elliott died in Cannes, France on March 5, 1940.



On left, Jessie Dermott from NDA Roxbury photo, age 15.

Center photograph of Jessie Dermott, age 14—

From *My Aunt Maxine*

On right and below: Stage Photographs of Maxine Elliott from the New York Public Library Digital Collection



Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Notre Dame Academy, Roxbury, MA Convent and School Papers, 2013.52.
- ◆ *Boston Globe Archives*, 1872-2018.
- ◆ New York Public Library Digital Collection, digitalcollections.nypl.org
- ◆ *My Aunt Maxine: The Story of Maxine Elliott* by Diana Forbes-Robertson, Viking Press, 1964.
- ◆ Broadway Photographs, Photography and the American Stage, broadway.cas.cs.edu