

# THE FANTASTICAL HISTORY OF PROFESSOR ALLEN - Chocolate Nightingale and Human Submarine



Professor Allen in sombre mood

Spencer Digby photograph

ANYONE who goes to concerts in Wellington more than once in a while must know the face of Professor Cecil Sweet Allen, as it appears on this page, and on the cover of this issue of *The Listener*. Professor Allen, the Chocolate Nightingale, Human Submarine, Pearl Diver and Coral Fisher, Submerged Posing Model, Deep-Sea-Monster Imitator, waterside worker and celebrity concert attender, under the Royal Acknowledgment of some crowned heads of Europe, one uncrowned one, and one half-uncrowned, is easily the most colourful figure round Wellington. To one half of his familiars, he is the man who sweeps in with a majestic flourish to

the front row of the dress circle at any good concert, dressed in his finest things—full evening dress, silk hat, satin-lined opera-cloak, white gloves and monocle, and countless medals and orders. To the other half (or perhaps they are the more numerous) he is the man who swims at the Te Aro baths all the year round, often on Saturdays, diving in and disappearing for a long time, then coming to the surface far away.

The Professor is over ten, but under a hundred (this is all the answer you will get if you ask him his age). His mother came from County Wexford in the West of Ireland. His father was a full-blooded negro from Barbadoes. He was the last of 13 children, some of whom died in infancy. He does not

drink and never smokes, except under water. He is slight, lithe and very fit. His hair is short, and greying. On the street he wears a black pin-stripe suit, spats, a velour hat (sometimes a pale pink felt), two-colour leather gloves, a silver chain from breast-pocket to side-pocket, and a silk scarf, sometimes a huge white one with green divers all over it. All the visible upper teeth are solid gold. As he puts it, on his printed letterhead, he is a "Subaquatic Scientist, Phenomenal, Fascinating, and Unique—Must be seen to be believed."

ONE way to get in touch with Professor Allen is to write care of his private box number. I decided, instead of writing, to inquire for him on the waterfront, where I understood he worked. I went at first to the Wharf Police, who were bound to know him well by sight; probably they would know where he was working that day, and I could approach him in person.

A sergeant and a constable were standing in the sun in the doorway admiring some importer's brand new truck. I made my business known. "Can you tell me," I asked, "where to find the Chocolate Nightingale—you know, the underwater swimmer." "Little Jimmy Allen?" said the constable; and he said he would ring the Labour Foreman. The Sergeant went on balancing on his heels on the doorstep in the sun. Just to make conversation, while the constable made inquiries as a result of something he had been told, I said to the Sergeant: "He does work on the wharves, doesn't he?" "Who?" said the Sergeant. "The Chocolate Nightingale," I said. The Sergeant had been concentrating on something else. "Oh," he said, with a toss of his head towards the constable at the telephone, "Thrush'll find him for you." And he turned away and went on balancing on the edge of the step. Little Jimmy Allen wasn't working that day, the Labour Foreman said, so I thanked Constable Thrush and left.

A couple of days later a letter arrived at *The Listener* office, on pale green paper, headed:

"Under Royal Acknowledgment—Professor Allen (The Chocolate Nightingale)—Light Baritone Vocalist, Teacher of Voice Culture and Theory—Concert Programmes Arranged, Musical Numbers Prepared—Radio Speaker to the New Zealand Government." This had been applied with a rubber stamp, as also another heading: "With the compliments of Professor Allen." Below, under a Royal Crown, it said: "Professor Allen is the only showman in the world today, eating, drinking and smoking underwater against every internal and external pressure."

The letter said that Professor Allen had heard *The Listener* wanted to see him, and he would be glad to give it any information that might be desired about underwater swimming. It only remained to make an appointment.

THERE are two main divisions in Professor Allen's interests in matters pertaining to this world. One division includes Royalty, gentry, and in general all persons of dignity and bearing. The other includes things done, seen, and imagined beneath the surface of the waters of the globe, whether oceans, harbours, standing waters, or swimming baths.

If he begins, as he did with me, on the first division, one of the first things he will tell you is that the greatest honour ever done to him in this country was done by the Duke of Gloucester before whom he had the privilege to swim. When you have got Professor Allen to sit down, he will lay his hat and cane on the table, and peel off his gloves with meticulous care; he does not merely pull his gloves off his hands. He makes the process a little ceremony of dignity and composure, peeling each one slowly down, with a look of fastidious detachment on his face.

"Yes," he says, "I went to a lot of trouble to see if the Duke of Gloucester would receive me, and his Chief of Staff was very nice—very nice indeed. And I swam before him, and wished him a Happy New Year, and he wrote me some very charming letters."

The Professor opened a leather case full of letters, his "Royal Acknowledgments." Letters from High Chamberlains, Lords Privy Seal, Aides-de-Camp and secretaries, mostly of painful brevity.

"You understand they all write very short letters," the Professor said, handing me "a very nice note" from a Lady-in-Waiting to the Duchess of Kent, thanking him for his letter.

The letters were mostly acknowledgments of his expressions of loyalty and regard. There was a black-edged one from Brussels, in reply to a letter Professor Allen had written "when His Majesty lost Her Majesty." It said "Le Roi a été touché profondément." There was another from the High Chamberlain at Doorn: "His Majesty the Kaiser permits me to send you his best thanks for your loyal thoughts."

"Yes, I had some very adverse comments for communicating with the Kaiser," The Professor explained. "But of course after I meet them I always thank them for the dignity with which they receive me—I'm only a poor common man."

He produced a letter from Count von Luckner. "I incurred serious disfavour for communicating with that gentleman."