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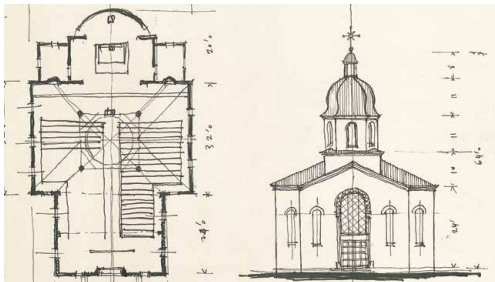
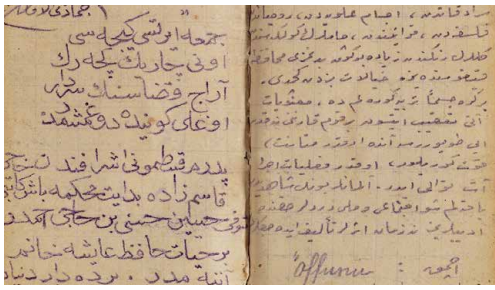
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Front cover: Map of a railway line from Berlin to Adrianópolis. In 'Diary of a Turkish Soldier who fought at Gallipoli', F592, Fryer Library, University of Queensland Library.

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George Landen Dann: A Dramatic History in Queensland

SUSAN DAVIS

Well before Ray Lawler’s script *Summer of the seventeenth doll* hit the stage in 1955, there were many Australian playwrights who were tackling questions of Australian identity including Queensland’s own George Landen Dann. Dann (1904-77) grew up in Sandgate where he lived with his parents and two sisters, and attended the local primary school before winning a scholarship to attend Brisbane Grammar School. He became involved in local amateur dramatics, both performing and playwriting. His work came to prominence through his winning the Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society’s playwriting competition in 1931 with *In beauty it is finished*—a play that featured a ‘fallen’ woman who enters a relationship with a so-called ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal man. The work signalled several threads which would reappear in much of his work: Aboriginal issues, the burden of familial duty and responsibility, and the experiences of those on the margins of society.¹

In beauty it is finished was a social realist drama which drew attention to people and events in Australian history that were not regularly seen on the stage at that time. Before the show opened rumours began to circulate that the play contained highly ‘sordid’ content and the publication *Smith’s Weekly* requested a copy of the script. The subsequent article sparked citywide interest and one of Brisbane’s most famous theatre controversies:

£50 prize awarded to filthy play: sordid drama of miscegenation

... the title is misleading, for the story is a sordid and soiled one of the dubious

romance of a self-confessed woman of the streets and a half-caste.

It is now for the Repertory Society to explain how it came to accept this unwholesome story for presentation ...

For there are terms and expressions in the script that cut across the accepted traditions of the stage, situations that reach new depths in the sordid, and such a lack of beauty in its outlook that the title is a travesty.²

The play was staged at His Majesty’s Theatre in Brisbane to packed houses and mainly favourable reviews. The furore, however, was extremely confronting for this shy young man who harboured desires to escape the constraints of society and a suffocating family life. He attempted to do so several times, following his fascination with islands and embarking on tramping holidays and sojourns on Hamilton and Fraser Islands, well before they became world-famous tourist destinations. He even enquired about purchasing one (West Molle Island, now Daydream), but was advised that it was unlikely that the asking price would suit him ‘as it is going to be converted into a high-class tourist joint.’³



Top: Photograph of a 1940s production of *Fountains beyond*. UQFL65, George Landen Dann Collection, Box 3

Above: Photographic portrait of George Landen Dann, c1940. UQFL65, George Landen Dann Collection, Box 3



Above: Photograph of three unidentified women, c1930. UQFL65, George Landen Dann Collection, Box 3

In Dann's papers in Fryer Library there is a small photo of three dour-looking women on the back of which is written, 'The female population of Cape Moreton' and 'the inspiration for *In Beauty*'.⁴ This indicates he must have visited this island, which can be seen from Sandgate where he lived.

One walking trip he embarked on proved highly significant, with characters he met and places he experienced becoming major influences for later plays. After his *In beauty* ... success and maelstrom, it appears Dann found it hard to settle back into ordinary life. Packing his

bag he headed north on a walking tour with a friend, 'Dick'.⁵ The timing of this trek is significant, with 1931 Australia being in the grips of the Depression and thousands of people roaming the land, desperate for food, work and shelter.

Throughout August and September he walked from Sandgate to Fraser Island, travelling as a swagman with Dick who was claiming rations. It took them six days to travel the fifty-three miles to Landsborough before catching lifts on a truck and a bus to reach Pialba. In a journal he describes their meals including billy tea, potatoes, chops, corned beef, boiled rice, boiled eggs, rice with syrup or jam and bread and butter when they could get it. They had a gun and Dick at times shot magpies and crows for food, accidentally shooting a kookaburra. They bathed in creeks and lagoons and camped where they could, sometimes under bridges, at showgrounds, in shacks or sheds and eventually at the beach.

From Urangan they took a boat over to White Cliffs, Fraser Island. George loved Fraser Island and was particularly impressed by his meeting with Aboriginal man, Freddy Ross, who inspired the character of Vic Filmer in *Fountains beyond*. Freddy Ross had been a runner and was a brother-in-law of Eddie Gilbert, the cricketer. Dann claimed that Freddy was quite possibly the most interesting person he had ever met, 'black or white', and was in thrall to his storytelling which entertained them each evening.

After we had eaten as much as we could we adjourned to near the fire where until a late hour of the night Fred 'held the floor'. He is a half-caste, and a wonderfully interesting story teller, possessing a personality one cannot resist right from the start.⁶

From Freddy, Dann also learnt a lot about the environment and living off the land. This included cooking eugaries, finding native honey, using iguana oil, catching turtles and sheltering under pandanus to avoid the rain. This bush knowledge was only one facet of Freddy's suite of talents:

An expert axeman, his prowess with the axe is a treat to watch. He cuts through a log as evenly and as straight as if it had been sawn. For five consecutive years he was the champion runner in the Maryborough district. His 'firsts' in wood-chopping contests are so numerous that he has forgotten the number. His fishing feats and sea adventures can be vouched for by any resident of the Urangan district. He has spent twenty-two years on Fraser Island and knows every inch of it. He lives at Urangan with his wife and children and earns his money at timber-getting, fishing, cutting and planting cane and cotton picking. He has the knack of being able to adapt himself successfully to almost any outdoor work. His one aversion is snakes. He is very much afraid of them.⁷

Dann also drew on accounts from Freddy of a fringe settlement being moved from the Urangan area; this becomes the basis for one of the key tensions in *Fountains beyond*. First staged in Sydney in 1942, *Fountains beyond*⁸ was produced by the New Theatre League with production notes written by Leslie Rees. Over the next two decades the play was performed across Australia. It was also produced by Cardiff Unity Theatre and toured in Wales, winning the Llandrindod drama festival.⁹ The play was rewritten in several different forms; as a full radio play, as an episode for an ABC *Adventures in Drama* series and as a musical, Dann and musician Gerry Cole seeing it as an Australian *Porgy and Bess*.¹⁰ Dann tried to secure a main stage production in London. However, a 1943 letter from Ailsa Grahame, who was in the ABC radio production of *Fountains beyond*, shows that Tyrone Guthrie, director of the Old Vic was dismissive of its chances in wartime London: 'To begin with one could not cast it with any authenticity. Its value as "pure entertainment" is not great and as a problem play the theme is rather remote from the experience and sentiment of a London audience.'¹¹ *Fountains beyond* was eventually staged in London by a small independent company at the Hovel Theatre Studio, Notting Hill, with a ten-day season in October 1949.¹²

After *Fountains beyond* Dann had several other major successes with *Caroline Chisholm*, *Ring out wild bells* (which was also filmed for television by the ABC) and the radio play *The orange grove*. Apart from service in the Army Entertainment Unit during World War 2, Dann worked as a draughtsman at Brisbane City Council. He continued to write for stage and radio when he retired to Coolumb on the Sunshine Coast in 1954.

Dann has been discussed by leading theatre critics and academics who have called for a wider recognition of his work. In his *History of Australian drama: volume 1* Leslie Rees devotes several pages to Dann's work and career, focusing on the furore around *In beauty ...* and the later *Fountains beyond*. He argues of *Fountains beyond*:

But it remains highly significant. Once again, it was a pioneer, the first serious drama about Aborigines on the fringes of towns, a subject later much ventilated in Parliament and Press, and dealt with in another vigorous if over-violent stage drama—David Ireland's *Image in the Clay*.¹³

Katharine Brisbane has also acknowledged the importance of his work. Brisbane was theatre critic for *The Australian* before starting Currency Press with her husband, Philip Parsons. She wrote several pieces on Dann's work including one after visiting him in 1977 and seeing the revival production of *In beauty ...*¹⁴ Reviewing that year she says:

On the downside this year I also mourned the death of George Landen Dann in Queensland, one of our neglected playwrights who deserved better from his country. His parting was alleviated a little by the touching performance of *In beauty it is finished* at La Boite Theatre in April only weeks before he died.¹⁵

Brisbane has since acknowledged his importance, particularly as a non-Indigenous playwright who was one of the pioneers in bringing Aboriginal issues to the stage. She suggests this body of work is worthy of revisiting now we have the Indigenous actors who can play the roles and re-examine the work afresh.¹⁶

More recent publications have drawn attention to his work and legacy. In her book on the history of La Boite Theatre and Brisbane Repertory Theatre Society (BTRS) Christine Comans¹⁷ devotes significant attention to the scandal around *In beauty ...* and to other works by Dann produced by BTRS. Most recently Brisbane's Playlab Press has published four of Dann's plays, three for the first time, as part of their *New Vintage* series. These include *In beauty it is finished*, *No incense rising*, *Fountains beyond*, and *The orange grove*.

This continuing interest might satisfy Dann's hope, revealed just months before his death: 'I must confess to you an ambition I've never told anyone before ... I always humbly hoped my name would live after I died and not die while I lived ...'¹⁸ Let us hope that his name and his work may continue to be known by new generations.

MANUSCRIPTS AND PLAYS

The Fryer Library holds three boxes of George Landen Dann's letters and ephemera at UQFL65.

Most of the manuscripts of the plays by Dann are held in the *Hanger Collection of Australian Playscripts* at the Fryer Library. This collection includes most of the plays by George Landen Dann that were produced, published, won awards or placed in competitions.

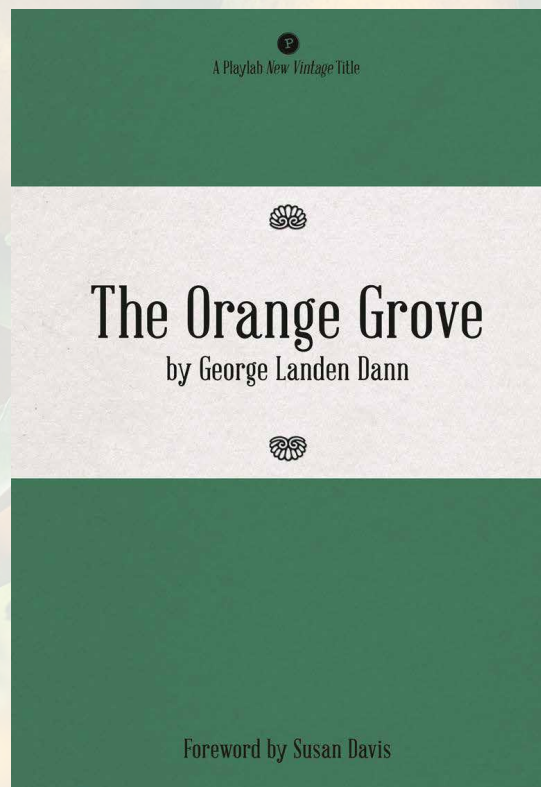
SUSAN DAVIS PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Education and The Arts at Central Queensland University, Noosa. She has background in drama education and her interest in George Landen Dann was sparked by discovering he lived the last twenty years of his life on the Sunshine Coast. She has written the introductions to four of his plays published by Playlab Press as part of the *New Vintage* series and a short script about him was recently published in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Creative Writing Courses*.

In 2013 Dr Davis directed a production of *The orange grove* at the Noosa Arts Theatre.

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For more information about George Landen Dann consult the AustLit Database at <http://www.austlit.edu.au>. AustLit is a non-profit collaboration between a network of researchers from Australian universities and the National Library of Australia, led by The University of Queensland.



Above: Front cover of *The orange grove* by George Landen Dann, with foreword by Susan Davis.

