

Colonial Drama Revealed, or Plays Submitted for Approval

by Janette Pelosi

For most people studying Australian nineteenth century drama perhaps the last place they would consider heading for their research is State Records in Sydney. However the State archives there include the scripts of no fewer than thirty Colonial plays. The series Colonial Secretary; CGS 908, *Plays submitted for approval prior to being performed, 1842–52* provides a great resource for students of Colonial drama in New South Wales. The plays include tragedies, dramas, melodramas, comedies, farces, burlesques, burlettas, operettas, a musical extravaganza and even two pantomimes. At least sixteen Colonial authors are represented, many of whom came from the ranks of actors and theatre managers.

Copies of plays were submitted to the Colonial Secretary for approval prior to being performed. This was in accordance with an Act of the Governor in Council, “*An Act for regulating places of public exhibition and entertainment*” (9 Geo. IV No. 14, 1 September 1828). The Act specified that: ‘if any person, or persons, shall act, represent, or perform ... any interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, concert, play, farce, or other entertainment ... without authority and license from the Colonial Secretary’ that person shall be fined the sum of £50 for every such offence. Thus a theatre was required to have a theatre license, renewable each year, before it could offer theatrical performances. A register of licenses issued under this Act and the subsequent “*An Act to amend the Law for regulating places of Public Exhibition and Entertainment*” (14 Vic. No. 23, 1 October 1850) is also held for the period January 1829 to April 1863. The register includes early licenses for such theatres as the Royal Victoria Theatre in Sydney and the Queen’s Theatre, Melbourne. Among the conditions of the license were that ‘such plays and entertainments only as shall have been performed at one of Her Majesty’s Licensed Theatres in London’ could be performed [4/1710 p. 497]. By May 1847 the license also permitted locally written plays ‘for the representation of which express permission shall have ... been given by the Colonial Secretary’ [4/5784 p. 85].

Many theatres held collections of the plays that had been performed in them. Sadly the destruction of such theatres by fire also destroyed their collections. Indeed the Royal Victoria Theatre in Pitt Street, Sydney was destroyed by fire in July 1880. Some Colonial plays have only survived because the actors who had performed them retained a copy. Thus the survival of so many nineteenth century plays in the letters of the Colonial Secretary is remarkable. The plays themselves were sent with a letter submitting them for the approval of the Colonial Secretary. The Colonial Secretary required a copy of the play to be retained. However frequently the authors requested that they borrow the copy submitted in order to make a prompt copy. In some cases they never returned the original to the Colonial Secretary so the play has not survived. The Colonial Secretary did not approve every play and indeed not every play was subsequently performed.

One of the most prolific playwrights of the 1840s was Edward Geoghegan yet his name appears on very few of the surviving plays. He came to New South Wales from Ireland, arriving on 25 January 1840 as a convict on the ship *Middlesex*. He had been convicted

on 6 June 1839 of 'obtaining goods under false pretences'. He was transported for seven years. One of the conditions of the early theatre licenses was that if the licensees 'shall employ, permit, or suffer any convict whether under a temporary remission of sentence or otherwise, to act, perform, or appear on the stage of the said Theatre at any time ... then ... this License shall be and become absolutely null and void' [4/1710 p. 498]. Hence the plays written by Edward Geoghegan were submitted under the names of the actors or managers of the theatre where they were intended to be performed.

Edward Geoghegan wrote to the Colonial Secretary in 1846 submitting his play *The Jew of Dresden* for approval. In his letter of 16 September 1846 he stated: "I have produced in less than four years the following pieces: 'The Hibernian Father' Original 5 Act Tragedy, 'Currency Lass' Original 2 Act Opera, 'Last Days of Pompeii' Adapted 3 Act Drama, 'Christmas Carol' Adapted 5 Act Drama, 'Royal Masquer' Original 2 Act Drama, 'Captain Kyd' Adapted 3 Act Drama, 'Lafitte the Pirate' Adapted 3 Act Drama." He also said that "Besides several poetical addresses – the remuneration I have received for all of which has been under £6!!!" Of these plays *The Hibernian Father* [SZ58], *The Currency Lass* [SZ51], *The Last Days of Pompeii* [SZ59] and *Lafitte the Pirate, or The Ocean Scourge* [SZ58] are extant at State Records.

All Geoghegan's plays were performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney. *The Currency Lass, or My Native Girl* was performed on 27 May 1844. *The Last Days of Pompeii* was performed on 29 July 1844 with the subtitle *or Nydia the Blind Girl*. It was performed as a benefit for John Lazar (CSIL 44/5543 and 44/8626). *A Christmas Carol, or Visions of the Past Present and Future* was performed on 3 March 1845 but no play is held. *Captain Kyd, or The Rover of the Seas* was performed on 3 April 1845 but again no play is held. *The Royal Masquer, or The Flower of Clyde* was performed on 12 May 1845 (CSIL 45/3549) but the play was not returned. It was first submitted by William Knight, Manager of the Royal Victoria, to the Colonial Secretary in December 1844 as *Flower of Clyde* (CSIL 44/9586). *Lafitte the Pirate* was also performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre on 24 November 1845, with the subtitle *or The Outlaws of Barritaria*. It was submitted by the actor Patrick Riley and intended as his benefit (CSIL 45/6126 and 45/6895). A copy of *The Jew of Dresden, or A Husband's Vengeance* is held at the Mitchell Library [ML A4043]. It was never performed. On 13 July 1852 Geoghegan, now in Melbourne, requested to borrow it from the Colonial Secretary for copying (CSIL 52/5556). It was sent to him in Melbourne and was never returned. It became an estray, eventually passing into the hands of Mr G. Johnston of Bondi.

Edward Geoghegan is almost certainly the author of both *Ravenswood* [SZ57], performed with the subtitle *or The Bride of Lammermoor*, and *True Love, or The Interlude Interrupted* [SZ69]. They are both in the same handwriting as the other plays he claimed as his own. Thus it appears that he wrote at least seven of the surviving plays. *Ravenswood* was an adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's novel. The play had been submitted to the Colonial Secretary in 1843 attributed to Geoghegan's friend, actor Francis Nesbitt, stage name of Francis Nesbitt McCrone. Geoghegan had known Nesbitt in Dublin prior to Nesbitt's arrival in Sydney in January 1841. Through Nesbitt he became connected with the Royal Victoria Theatre in Sydney. *Ravenswood* was performed once only on 13 February 1843 at the Victoria as a benefit for Nesbitt. *True Love* was submitted by

William Knight and Joseph Wyatt, proprietors of the Royal Victoria (CSIL 45/4058). It was staged there on 23 June 1845, billed as 'written by a Gentleman in Sydney'.

Geoghegan is best known for the controversy over the similarity of his tragedy *The Hibernian Father* to an earlier tragedy performed in Dublin called *The Warden of Galway* by the Reverend Mr Edward Groves. *The Hibernian Father* was performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre on 6 May 1844. The title role was played by Francis Nesbitt. Both plays centre on the story set in the fifteenth century of the Warden of Galway whose son is charged with the murder of a friend at sea. When the son is sentenced to death, a sentence that the executioner refuses to carry out, then the father carries out the sentence himself as a true warden. Part of the tragedy is that the son was about to be reprieved. When *The Hibernian Father* was performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre on 6 May 1844 it was attended by some who had also seen the Dublin tragedy. Geoghegan was accused of plagiarism. The play was submitted by William Knight in May 1844 (CSIL 44/3673) and was approved with some changes. In 1852 actor T.C. Willis applied for permission to copy the *The Hibernian Father* for his benefit (CSIL 52/4057). The play had been first submitted under the title *The Irish Father* and the location of *The Hibernian Father* remained a mystery until 1966 when academic Albert B. Weiner discovered it in the Colonial Secretary's correspondence of 1852. He was able to compare the scripts of both plays and exonerate Geoghegan from direct plagiarism although similarities of plot and character names remain. Both Dr Weiner and Dr Oppenheim have fully discussed the issue of plagiarism so I won't expand upon it here. Suffice it to say that the controversy was an asset to Geoghegan whose subsequent plays were advertised as by 'The Author of *The Hibernian Father*'.

Two plays by Charles Alexander Dibdin are extant at State Records. The first is *The Queer Client* [SZ 62] which was performed on 16 May 1842 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney with the subtitle *or The Avenger*. It is based on an 1837 story in Charles Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. It was published in Sydney by W. Baker in 1842. It is the story of George Heyling, the queer client. A further extant play by Dibdin is the one act eccentric farce *Billy Barlow* [SZ 49]. The title page is dated July 1843. A play of this title was performed on 13 April 1843 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney. The extant sequel was submitted on 1 August 1843 by the author who stated it was written for Mr Coppin (CSIL 43/5607). Billy Barlow was a stock character, based on some British street ballads. Benjamin Griffin performed a song about Billy Barlow at Maitland in 1843. George Coppin gained great popularity as the raggedly dressed 'new chum' Billy Barlow. The extant play was performed with the title *The Barlow Family* on 12 October 1843 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney.

H.C. O'Flaherty was an actor and violinist at the Royal Victoria Theatre, and husband of the actress Eliza Winstanley. His drama in two acts *Isabel of Valois, or The Tyrant of Navarre* [SZ 56] was performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney on 11 August 1842 (with the subtitle *or The Tyrant Queen*). Eliza Winstanley performed the title role. In his letter to the Colonial Secretary he stated it was a drama 'founded on the records of Navarre'. He had received the Colonial Secretary's approval on 1 August 1842 (CSIL 42/5458).

H.C. O'Flaherty also wrote anonymously the one act burletta *Life in Sydney, or The Ran Dan Club*, 'written expressly for the Royal Victoria Theatre Sydney July 31st 1843' [SZ 60]. The text is in the same hand as *Isabel of Valois*. There may have been other authors involved. It was an adaptation of W.T. Moncreiff's *Tom and Jerry, or Life in London* (1821). The Colonial Secretary refused permission for the play to be performed saying 'I regret I cannot sanction the representation of this piece at the Theatre as it contains matters of a libellous character independently of other objections' (CSIL 43/6965). Curiously a play titled *The Ran Dan Club* was performed at the Victoria Theatre, Adelaide on 15 August 1850 when O'Flaherty's contemporaries John Lazar and George Coppin were proprietors of that theatre. O'Flaherty and his wife Eliza Winstanley had departed for England in 1846.

John Lazar was an actor who also became theatre manager at the Royal Victoria Theatre in Sydney in 1843. He became Mayor of Adelaide from 1855 to 1858 and later became a town clerk in New Zealand. Lazar wrote the farce *Contradiction, or A Wife Upon Sufferance* [SZ 50] in 1843 (CSIL 43/5358) and also submitted *Desrues* [SZ 52], a melodrama in three acts in 1843 (CSIL 43/7061). *Desrues* was written by Thomas Wilson, then Mayor of Adelaide. Both were performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney, *Contradiction* on 6 September 1843 and *Desrues* on 16 October 1843. Lazar also wrote at least two pantomimes that were presented at the Royal Victoria in 1846. They were *St George and the Dragon, or Harlequin and the Seven Champions of Christendom* [SZ 63] and *Zazezizozu, or Harlequin Dominoes and Chess and the King of the Card Island* [SZ 67]. *St George and the Dragon* was submitted in two parts, a *Grand Pantomime of St George* (CSIL 46/1913) and *Comic Scenes in Pantomime of St George and the Dragon* (CSIL 46/2456). The pantomimes were typical of the period, with *St George* featuring an acrobatic harlequinade with Harlequin, Clown, Pierrot, Pantaloon and Columbine through a George Street market in Sydney.

Two of the authors of extant plays were to become parliamentarians. They were Jacob Levi Montefiore and George Ferrers Pickering. J.L. Montefiore was a Member of the Legislative Council from 1856 to 1860 and from 1874 to 1877. Montefiore wrote the two act drama *The Duchess of Chevreuse, or A Duel in the Olden Times* [SZ53] which was performed on 22 August 1843 at the Royal Victoria. John Lazar submitted the play to the Colonial Secretary as simply *The Duel* (CSIL 43/5494). Montefiore had translated it from the French of *Un Duel Sous le Cardinal de Richelieu* by J.P. Lockroy and E. Baden (1832). It was the first French play that had been translated by an Australian resident. Lazar stated 'there is a great scarcity at the present moment of printed plays ... and I am anxious that all ... applicants for dramatic literature in New South Wales should have every encouragement' (CSIL 43/5494). He also translated, again from the French, the text of Casmiri Delavigne's comic opera *Don Juan D'Austriche*, submitted as *John of Austria* [SZ 57] (CSIL 47/3632). It was performed as *Don John of Austria* at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney on 3 May 1847 with music composed by Isaac Nathan. Montefiore was thus the librettist of the first opera written in Australia. Montefiore also wrote *Marguerite, or He Might Do Worse* [SZ 61], a comedy in three acts set in Paris (CSIL 47/3785). He was also known for one of the first books on economic theory published in Australia. G.F. Pickering was a journalist and poet who became Member for Goldfields North from 1865 to 1868. Pickering wrote only one play *Lough Deargh's*

Shrine, or The Cave of Penance [SZ 57] in 1847 (CSIL 47/1729). A book of his poems was published in 1852.

Conrad Knowles is best known as Australia's first Hamlet and first Othello. He was an actor at Barnett Levey's Royal from 1832 and performed for 12 years until his death in 1844. He was stage manager and acting manager of the Sydney Royal and Royal Victoria. Knowles wrote the extant three act tragedy *Salathiel, or The Jewish Chieftain* [SZ 64] (CSIL 42/4639), adapted from Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Leila, or The Siege of Granada* (1838). It was performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney on 4 August 1842 as a benefit for Knowles (CSIL 42/4978). The play was published in Sydney by T. Trood in 1842. From November 1843 until his death in 1844 Knowles managed the Royal Victoria Theatre in Melbourne.

Charles Nagel was a veteran of Her Majesty's 97th Regiment and author of two plays. He had arrived in the Colony as Lieutenant Nagel in October 1837 and obtained his remission as a retired military officer in 1839 (CSIL 37/9608). He may have made connections with other playwrights. In 1838 he gave his address as Pickering, Merton and in 1850 his address was Mess^{rs} Montefiore, Spring Street in Sydney (CSIL 50/178). He used their addresses for letters concerning his unsuccessful attempts to obtain land as a veteran. Nagel wrote several times to the Colonial Secretary soliciting employment. In February 1843 he stated 'we have for some time been suffering absolute want, notwithstanding every exertion on my part to obtain a livelihood' (CSIL 43/1112). He wrote again in June 1843, applying for an appointment and stressing his 'conduct, during a service of near twelve years in the army'. 'I am now, Sir, with a wife and five young children in the utmost distress' (CSIL 43/4595). It appears his plays were written out of an immediate need for himself and his family and it is certain that they did not make his fortune.

Nagel wrote the one act burlesque musical extravaganza *Shakesperi Conglommorofunnidogammoniae* [SZ 65]. The play was published by W.A. Duncan of King Street, East Sydney in 1843. It is the only play held by State Records in published form rather than manuscript. It was first performed on 1 July 1844 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney and included songs set to popular airs of the day. The role of Macbeth was played by J.G. Griffiths. Macbeth suggests to Othello that Ophelia should be prevented from deserting to Dick the Third because she owned cattle and sheep in New South Wales. 'Her last clip ... counted full / Forty five bales of pure merino wool.' State Records' printed copy was submitted on 10 June 1844 (CSIL 44/4568).

Nagel had previously written *The Mock Catalani in Little Puddleton*, a musical burletta. It was an adaptation from the German of *Die Falsche Catalani in Krehwinkel*, which referred to the Italian prima donna Angelica Catalani. It had been submitted to the Colonial Secretary, Edward Deas Thomson, as *The Sham Catalani* which received his approval 'with the exception of the Oath, which must be omitted' (CSIL 42/3089). Nagel stated that he had 'not inserted the words of the different airs but they are in part from the Italian with my words, and partly songs of my own composition'. A note of 28 April states: 'Mr Nagel would feel honoured by the presence of Mr & Mrs Thomson at its representation'. One wonders whether the Colonial Secretary and his wife attended the

performance on 4 May 1842 at the Royal Victoria. While Nagel was reminded by the Colonial Secretary's clerk to submit a copy of *The Mock Catalani* it appears that he neglected to do so.

The actor Joseph Simmons had first arrived in Sydney in 1830 and returned in 1833. He became joint manager of the Theatre Royal with Barnett Levey in 1834. His claim to fame was as the Colony's first Macbeth. He wrote an entertainment *Engagements* which was performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney on 9 February 1842. He was a sensation as the 'drag' lead in Nagel's *The Mock Catalani in Little Puddleton*. He opened his own theatre, the Royal City in Market Street, Sydney in 1843. It was a venture which left him penniless. He performed in Geoghegan's *Currency Lass* as Lanty O'Liffey in 1844. Simmons wrote a drama in three acts *The Duellist* [SZ 54], performed on 12 August 1844 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney (with the subtitle *or The Minister's Daughter*). He wrote to the Colonial Secretary: 'Sir, I take the liberty of requesting that permission may be given for the representation at the above theatre of the accompanying original drama entitled "The Duellist", it being perfectly free of dialogue and plot from anything local, political, sectarian, or immoral' (CSIL 44/4374). Simmons retired from the stage in 1845 but appeared at his benefit at the Theatre Royal, Sydney in 1879.

Francis Belfield wrote four of the plays extant at State Records. His plays were performed in both Melbourne and Sydney. He had to seek approval from the New South Wales Colonial Secretary because the Colony of Victoria did not separate from New South Wales until 1851. *The Rebel Chief* [SZ 110], a melodrama in three acts, was performed at the Queen's Theatre, Melbourne on 14 December 1849. The play itself is signed by the author. Belfield played the lead role of George Melville in his moral drama *Retribution, or The Drunkard's Curse* [SZ 106]. According to Ferguson (4991) it was the first play printed in Melbourne, at the *Daily News* Office, Collins Street in 1849. The Colonial Secretary gave his approval in December 1849 and the play was performed at the Queen's Theatre, Melbourne on 14 February 1850. It was later reprinted as *Bottle, or The Drunkard's Curse* about 1872. The play survives at State Records because it was purchased as an archival estray from Peter Arnold of Melbourne. It is the original manuscript rather than the printed version.

Belfield's later plays were both performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre in Sydney. *Zisca The Avenger* [SZ 68] was a tragic play in five acts which was performed on 3 November 1851. Belfield wrote that he was 'about to produce it for my benefit at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney' (CSIL 51/9783). *The Outcast, or The Irish Maniac* [SZ 1019] was performed on 29 July 1852 also as a benefit for the author (CSIL 52/5554). He submitted a further play *The Mysteries of Sydney* (CSIL 53/3912 not found) performed on 6 June 1853 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, as another benefit for the author. Unfortunately the play and related letters have not been located.

Thomas Fennell wrote a two act Turkish farce called *They are Both Gone Mad, or The Cadi and the Cobbler* [SZ 66]. The play itself is dated 1848 but it was not submitted until April 1849 (CSIL 49/4079). The reviewer wrote: 'I find nothing objectionable in it except the orthography!' The Colonial Secretary wrote: 'It is not my province to object to the piece on account of the orthography. Let permission therefore be given.' It was to be

performed at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney. The manuscript includes a description of the stage costume. Kesam the Cobbler dresses first as a cobbler without a beard and second as the Cadi with a beard. The Cadi of Constantinople's dress includes a turban and sword and long beard and he later dresses as a cobbler without a beard.

George Arabin was a writer from Hobart. He wrote the drama *Rookwood, or the Adventures of Dick Turpin and [Death of] Tom King* [SZ 57] which was performed at the Victoria Theatre, Sydney on 13 February 1851. Arabin had sought permission from the Colonial Secretary in late 1850 (CSIL 50/8940). He borrowed the play to make a prompt copy but fortunately returned it (CSIL 50/9258 and 50/9537). His earlier tragedy, *Malavolti, or, Mother and Son* was performed at the Royal Albert Theatre, Hobart on 14 July 1845.

Edward Reeve wrote the three act tragedy *Raymond Lord of Milan* [SZ 103], a drama in blank verse set in thirteenth century Spain, in 1263, just after the abdication of Charles V. He applied for permission for its performance in 1848 (CSIL 48/7620 not found). The play is preceded by 'Facts from History for the Tragedy of Raymond Lord of Milan' based on seven contemporary histories and encyclopaedias. It was finally performed on 14 September 1863 at the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney when it was hailed by both audiences and critics. It had been published in Sydney in 1851 by Hawksley and Cunninghame. Nearly a century later the play was revived by May Hollinworth at the Metropolitan Theatre, Sydney in October 1950. This play was an archival estray purchased from G.K. Gray and Co. in June 1975.

Negroe Vengeance, A Tale of Barbadoes [SZ 57] was a drama in two acts 'intended acting on Monday August the 4th' at the Maitland Theatre. The play was submitted by the theatre's manager Thomas T. Pitt of East Maitland on behalf of the 'Committee of the Amateur performers of this place (in aid of the Benevolent Asylum)' (CSIL 45/4571). There had been other benefits for the Maitland Benevolent Asylum in 1844 [4/1710 p. 525]. The extant play was performed at Maitland on 6 August 1845. Its authorship remains unknown. Among its characters were Freeman, 'overseer of a farm', Barney McShane, 'a late imposition from the Emerald Isle', Caesar, 'a negro slave under the charge of Freeman', Tomare, 'a runaway negro & leader of robbers' and Bone Squash, 'a free nigger from America with high notions of liberty'. The play provides evidence of regional theatre beyond Sydney. Such local theatres had previously existed at places like Port Macquarie and Emu Plains.

Many writers familiar with the plays found in the Colonial Secretary's correspondence have asked if more plays are likely to be found. The answer is that it is still possible. As recently as May 2003 archivist Christine Shergold located a new play written by G.W. Daniels of Bathurst. It is *The Bathurst Rivals, or The Laughing Jackass, a local extravaganza*, a burlesque of one act [4/3317]. It was advertised to be performed on 17 March 1856 and was approved on that date for representation at any licensed theatre (CSIL 56/2578). The Emperor offers the hand in marriage of his daughter the Princess. The two rivals, the Italian Celestino and the bushranger Phillibuster, must seek out the laughing jackass to win the Emperor's favour. The play is interesting for its local references. Phillibuster, states: 'I'm young Australia the spot of earth / That bore me,

bore a hero at my birth.' The singer Anna Bishop, the actress Lola Montez and the local tailor Pike all rate a mention.

The plays that have survived at State Records provide an insight into the variety of Colonial drama that was part of entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century. They particularly highlight the vitality of the Royal Victoria Theatre, Sydney. Their many authors, including Geoghegan, Belfield, Lazar and Dibdin, pioneered Colonial drama in New South Wales and Victoria. They provide evidence of an emerging Australian dramatic tradition. Without the Colonial Secretary's approval our knowledge of Colonial drama would be so much the poorer.

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These plays were extracted from the series State Records NSW: Colonial Secretary; CGS 905, *Main series of letters received, 1826–1982*. (CSIL means Colonial Secretary In-Letter.) Some in-letters relating to the plays are located with the plays while others are in the *Main series*.

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Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales: *The Jew of Dresden, or A Husband's Vengeance*, a tragedy in three acts by the Author of *The Hibernian Father*, *Currency Lass*, *Royal Masquer*, with letters to the Colonial Secretary dated 16 September 1846 and 2 September 1852. [Photocopy at ML A4043; microfilm copy ML Reel FM3/236]. Further letter at State Records NSW (CSIL 52/5556) refers to Geoghegan's letter of 16 September 1846.

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