

# EVE LANGLEY'S THONGS

A PAIR OF MISMATCHED THONGS HAVE BECOME A TALISMAN FOR BLUE MOUNTAINS AUTHOR, PLAYWRIGHT AND POET MARK O'FLYNN

Illustration Judith Martinez

EVE LANGLEY, author of *The Pea Pickers* and *White Topee*, lived for the last sad years of her life in a dilapidated shack at the end of Denison Road, in Leura, a long walk from town. Her publishers, Angus & Robertson, bought her the hut in a remarkable act of altruistic generosity, but perhaps they also wanted to get her out of their hair. After her initial success, (*The Pea Pickers* was hugely popular in its day), Langley continued to pester them with over 4,000 pages of single-spaced typescript, ten manuscripts in all, that were largely unpublishable. She didn't even care if the typewriter ribbon ran out. It is not hard to imagine she was often sending them something akin to Braille.

Despite her tragic life, (she was hospitalised for seven years in a New Zealand mental institution, admitted against her will by her husband), Langley was a maverick, cross-dressing, rather inspired and inspirational eccentric. Her greatest desire, it appears, was to be a man, although at the same time she was avowedly heterosexual. The two novels allude to this repeatedly in language that is as fresh today as when it was first published in 1942: 'Kissing you must be like colliding with a hair brush.' It would seem that there was some confusion about her sexuality. Gender fluidity might be the contemporary term. She would dress as a man, replete with false whiskers, and parade around the township of Katoomba wearing a suit with a pith helmet and a machete at her side. For the editors at Angus & Robertson she must have been hard work.

Notably, she changed her name by deed poll to Oscar Wilde, which was one of several alter egos, Steve from *The Pea Pickers* being the principal one. She also adopted some of Wilde's mannerisms and dandy eloquence. Oscar Wilde seems to have been a sort of defence mechanism; she asked her publishers, if they were going to reject a manuscript, to address the correspondence to Oscar Wilde, but if they were going to accept it, would they instead write to Eve Langley. They never did.

In her hut, called rather grandly *Iona Lympus*, apart from the manuscripts on pink paper, she kept paintings on cardboard cereal boxes and dolls. She also kept several cats and pet rats, named Achilles and Apollo. There was also the shell of an old bus in which she stored her precious things, including the hundreds of mysterious parcels containing nothing but chicken wire, or feathers, or stones.

She argued with her neighbours. She was fiercely paranoid. Her spirit was restless and confused. When she died her body was not discovered for over three weeks. The rats had gnawed her face. Very quickly, the literary scavengers (of which I am now one) came and removed her papers, presumably with the view to preserve them. The typescripts are now housed in the Mitchell Library. When I first saw it the bus was still there, rusting on blocks of cement, the hut also still standing. Twenty-six years after her death, underneath a sheet of nasty looking fibro I found her thongs, one red, one green, weathered and brittle with exposure to the elements. I took them as a faded talisman for a play I was then writing about her. There is something poignant and deeply moving about them. You can tell how small her feet must have been, how unconventional she was, even in the matter of thongs. At the time the State Member for Parliament asked if he should find some money to preserve the remains of the hut, but like many good ideas it faded away. I offered the thongs to the local historical society, but they asked how did I know they were actually Eve's thongs? Might they not have been planted there by some recalcitrant youth intent on messing with history? There is nothing left of the old shack now. Just corrugated iron sheets where the walls have at last collapsed around a squat chimney, a few rusty water tanks, and some curious bundles of chicken wire. You can tell why she was terrified of bushfire, the scrub has all but claimed it back.

I kept the thongs for several years while I was writing the play, then eventually put them back, hidden in a hollow by the chimney. I pulled them out again for the purposes of the Black and Blue exhibition. They strike me as a powerful, evocative symbol of a moving and tragic story. For a moment they rose above the state in which I originally found them, that is, effectively rubbish. The amateur historian in me knows I should one day put them back for good. A final resting place of sorts. One day I will.

Langley, E. *The Pea Pickers*, Angus & Robertson, 1942  
Thwaite, J.L. *The Importance of Being Eve Langley*, Angus & Robertson, 1989  
O'Flynn, M. *The Last Days of Ava Langdon*, UQP, 2016

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