

## ELIZABETH DANNE

BIOLOGIST AND TEACHER 10-04-1920 – 12-09-2012

By Sarah Brenan and Mary Lush



The portrait

Image: courtesy of the Danne family



The woman at 'work' – at a staff-student baseball game circa 1965 when Fintona's uniform was brown

Image: Mary Lush

Elizabeth Danne was a woman who adapted to world events and the circumstances of her life with intelligence and energy.

Born in Stratford-on-Avon, England, the youngest of three children, Elizabeth (then Pemberton) had a childhood of nannies and governesses, Shakespearean pageants and picking mulberries from Anne Hathaway's cottage garden, followed by boarding at 'The Hawne School' where she became head girl. She wanted to study medicine; but her parents' divorce and the Great Depression so eroded family support that instead, in 1939, she accepted a teaching studentship to fund her through a science degree and diploma of education. She was on a walking holiday in Switzerland that same year with her brother David when they heard that war was imminent and made a dash to the coast to catch the last ferry back to England. David, a Spitfire pilot, was killed in the Battle of Britain.

Student teachers were moved out of London during the war for their protection, so Elizabeth graduated at Cambridge University with London University qualifications. She started her career at King Edward VI's School and because of the wartime teacher shortage was co-opted to take additional classes in a nearby boys' school. At war's end she met Geoffrey Danne, an Australian naval commando, and after a two week courtship of walking and picnicking in the Cotswolds was engaged to be married. She set sail on the *Stirling Castle* with other war

brides bound for Australia in August 1946, part of the great criss-crossing of the oceans by 'bride ships' following the war.

Elizabeth and Geoffrey began married life in a converted shed at St. Phillips Vicarage, Collingwood, Melbourne. Geoffrey used the training assistance available to returned servicemen to study architecture. They moved to houses in the eastern suburbs to accommodate their expanding family, including one remarkable house in Kew that was designed and built by Geoffrey, unconventional and expensive to build. Architecture did not provide the income they needed for their family, which by then numbered four children, so Elizabeth went back to teaching.

As a qualified biology teacher Elizabeth was in demand in State and independent schools, however she was most familiar with independent, single sex schools and this was the system she entered in 1959, first in a temporary position at Camberwell Church of England Girls' Grammar School, and then for the next 20 years at Fintona Girls' School.

Elizabeth arrived at Fintona in the vanguard of married women with children returning to work. She was a beautiful, 39 year old woman with a mellifluous voice (and interesting mispronunciations to the ears of Australian schoolgirls). School laboratories were primitive, and year-level textbooks didn't exist so staff wrote and dictated copious notes. She was precise, purposeful, kind, and passionate about her subject. As girls giggled, and occasionally fainted, over dead rats on dissecting boards, she reminded them that careful observation would reveal much about their own bodies. She commanded and gave respect, was always approachable, yet never overstepped the boundary between teacher and student.

Biology and teaching changed during Elizabeth's career. She was alert to new discoveries in science to a remarkable degree: she embraced the discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953 and the transformation in genetics that followed from it, becoming more and more a Darwinist to the point of reversing the usual order of teaching to better emphasise variation and natural selection. A woman of firm Christian faith, she could reconcile evolution with Christian teachings. Teaching methods also came under scrutiny, and she commented that changes in classroom practice always worked because teachers made them work. The rise of free expression in English saw her giving grammar lessons in Biology classes so that her students would achieve the precision needed of scientists. As one student noted '...if the liquid in the test tube didn't change colour, it was never to be "no result" but rather, "no reaction"'.

When her first child was born Elizabeth said that she "suddenly knew what a teacher needed to offer to a child, not just the presence of a subject, but the understanding of a human being". She developed this second aspect of her teaching in association with like-minded staff and influenced by 'Social Biology' (biology for social workers) as taught by Delys Sargeant at the University of Melbourne in the 1960s and 70s. Practical sex education was particularly dear to Elizabeth, including sometimes controversial information about sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. In 1961 Margaret Cunningham, the owner/principal, had given

Fintona to the staff and old girls; in 1980 Elizabeth became the first staff member elected to the Board, where one of her actions was to prepare a paper on an emerging STD, AIDS.

In 2007 and 2008, the oral history group linked to Fintona interviewed Elizabeth. She made a much valued contribution to the group's first release ([www.fintonahistory.com.au](http://www.fintonahistory.com.au)) by being the voice-over for Betty Henty-Wilson, with whom she had taught.

Elizabeth's own children enjoyed many beach holidays and strolls through the intertidal zone learning about the pattern of life there, but family life was complicated by Geoffrey's problems. Elizabeth drew support from Al-Anon. The Al-Anon 'Serenity Prayer' was on her refrigerator door and was a simple but firm source of strength to her, and hence to the family. In return, Elizabeth supported Al-Anon. From 1981-1990 she edited Al-Anon's magazine 'Australink', she was on the Board of Trustees and the Executive Committee, and in 1984 represented Australia at an international meeting. In addition to these 'retirement' activities she spent time with her family and read on radio for the sight handicapped, an activity disappointingly curtailed after 15 years by OH&S regulations preventing 80 year olds entering the radio station to 'work'. She carefully developed her skills as an artist with several teachers, particularly in making lino cut prints.

A biologist to the end, Elizabeth opted for a low environmental impact, cardboard coffin. She was pre-deceased by Geoffrey and her daughter Jane. She is survived by her children Susan, Peter and Josie, daughter-in-law Linda, and by grandchildren and great grandchildren. She lives on in the memories of colleagues and of generations of school girls.

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