Dr Chris Tiffin reveals the work of David Malouf in an occasional series featuring Australian writers strongly represented in the Fryer Library Collections.

David Malouf has long been associated with The University of Queensland. Born in South Brisbane in 1934, he studied and subsequently taught at the University before leaving for a ten-year stint in Europe. Perhaps more importantly, The University of Queensland Press published his first books, Bicycle (1970), Neighbours in a Thicket (1974), and Johnno (1975). Although he subsequently moved on to publish with another international publisher and live abroad for a part of each year, Malouf has maintained close links with the University and with the Fryer Library. Appropriately, he inscribed one of the Fryer Library copies of his first book, “On a visit to the Fryer Library – an old haunt. 7.ix.’75, David Malouf”.

The core of an author collection is the manuscripts. Notebooks, drafts of novels, correspondence with editors, and proofs all help to establish the evolution of the text and allow critics to clarify the apparent intent of the author. Manuscripts are also, of course, of immense use to the biographer who is given an insight into the private and often sensitive world of the subject and able to adjust and realign public perceptions. The Fryer Library has the leading collection of manuscripts of Malouf’s books dating back to Bicycle, in some cases including several drafts, deleted passages or even chapters, and correspondence with editors. Novels of which the drafts are held by Fryer Library include, Johnno, An Imaginary Life, Remembering Babylon, Fly Away Peter, Child’s Play, The Great World and Harland’s Half Acre. Consultation of the manuscripts shows that until late in the revision process “Johnno” was “Johnny”, while An Imaginary Life was submitted to the publishers as “Letters from Pontus”. The earliest Malouf manuscripts are not in the Malouf Papers, however, but are letters in the Judith Rodriguez manuscript collection.
Malouf and Judith Green, as she was then, were friends at the start of their respective careers and were two of the Four Poets who were published in a volume of that name by Cheshire in Melbourne in 1962, almost a decade before Malouf’s first solo book. The manuscript collection includes an extensive correspondence between them.

The Fryer Library holds a very reliable collection of Malouf’s published books including first editions with dust jackets of all his titles, many reprints and alternative editions, and even a good set of the translations of his novels. One of the more difficult aspects of collecting in Australian literature is to pick up foreign translations of Australian writers. Our bibliographical orientation has been rather monolingual, and probably no library in the country has a foolproof way of monitoring Swedish, or Czech or Korean translations of our national writers. Nevertheless, thanks particularly to the generosity of Malouf himself, Fryer Library holds a good range of the translations of his novels particularly those in European languages. Just as titles in English sometimes change from one publishing environment to another – Thomas Keneally’s Schindler’s Ark became Schindler’s List for the American edition and subsequent film – so the translated titles show interesting variations as foreign publishers play up different aspects of the text. Thus, while the Scandinavian publishers translated The Conversations at Curlow Creek literally, the German publisher accentuated the idea of the talk going late into the night with “Vigil (Nachtwache) at Curalow Creek.” The French publisher took this a step further, abandoning the local name altogether and renaming the novel, “Last Conversation of the Night” (Dernière Conversation Dans La Nuit: Roman). An Imaginary Life is a title that focuses on the narrator, the exiled Ovid, but other translations give the book over to the wild child he attempts to befriend. The German edition is entitled Das Wolfkind: Roman, while the French title is L’Enfant du Pays Barbare.

A feature of Malouf’s diverse productivity is the collaborative work he has done with artists in other mediums, especially music. Malouf has written the libretti of several operas including one based on Patrick White’s novel, Voss, with music by Richard Meale. Others include Jane Eyre and Baa Baa Black Sheep both with music by Michael Berkeley, and “Invocation to Earth”, an opera based on an incident in the life of Mary Gilmore.

Apart from manuscripts of recent novels which may yet be acquired by Fryer Library, there are few significant absences from the collection. Perhaps the most notable is the US edition of the novella, Child’s Play, which was published by George Braziller in 1981, preceding the English edition. Published in the same volume with this novella, was a second called The Bread of Time to Come. In later editions this was renamed Eustace and a third story, The Prowler, was included. The Fryer Library has collected the libretti of Malouf’s operas but not recordings of the operas nor the sheet music. This is an understandable decision given that the collecting focus is on Malouf’s contribution to the works, but no doubt there will be a frustrated researcher or two in future years. Perhaps the sheet music of “The Fox and the Maggie: a divertissement for two voices” should be acquired since there is no separate libretto published.

There is also a sprinkling of later editions of novels that have been missed including American editions of Harland’s Half Acre and The Great World, and a later UK edition of Johnno. It is debatable whether Canadian editions from the 1990s would enhance the collection, especially when they are from the same publishers as the US editions already held. They may, however, have different dust jackets indicating separate marketing campaigns. Overall, though, the collection is comprehensive. It is hard to imagine a scholar coming to the Fryer Library to work on Malouf and being disappointed in the collection whether the focus of the research was biographical, critical or bibliographical.

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