

Whole page
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Ronald Mann

RONALD MANN escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp hospital in northern Italy in 1943 and walked 700 miles to rejoin the Allied advance. He went on to become an accomplished watercolourist, theatrical impresario, a member of the World Methodist Council for 10 years and an activist for the Moral Rearmament (MRA) group.

Serving with the Northumberland Hussars, a light anti-tank artillery regiment, in the Western Desert, Captain Ronald Mann and his troops were surrounded and taken prisoner in March 1942. After several months in transit camps in Tripoli and Naples, Mann was transferred to northern Italy, first to Rezzonello and finally to Pontanellato, near Parma. In September 1943 he was injured playing football in the camp. He was moved to the prison hospital at Piacenza, but lost the sight of his right eye. The story of his escape from Piacenza and his 700-mile trek south along the Apennine mountain ranges is told in his book *Moving the Mountain* (1995).

In prison camp Mann had taken lessons in painting with oil and watercolour. After the war he spent some months recuperating in the Lake District where Heaton Cooper and Bernard Byre-Walker, two established Lakeland artists, took him on climbing and painting expeditions among the fells and tarns he loved so much. Under their expert guidance he developed his own talent as a landscape painter in watercolour and held nearly 40 one-man exhibitions over the course of the next 40 years.

Several of these exhibitions were opened by friends Mann had made in the theatre – including Thora Hird, Wendy Craig and James Fox. His passion for theatre arose from seeing its effectiveness for reaching people outside the normal range of the Church and his experience promoting plays and films of Moral Rearmament in post-war Italy and in South America.

In 1963 he returned to London to undertake the marketing of the MRA plays at the Westminster Theatre, including Alan Thornhill's *Mr Wilberforce* MP, Peter Howard's *Mr Brown Comes Down the Hill*, and Thornhill's musical *Annie*. Mann became a director of Westminster Productions and in 1975 founded Aldersgate Productions as a Methodist initiative with the late Dr John Gibbs, a former vice-president of the Methodist Conference.

Aldersgate Productions was originally set up to produce a musical about John Wesley, *Ride! Ride!*, which toured 10 provincial theatres before reaching the West End. Following the success of this production, Mann and Gibbs decided to

continue and invited representatives from other denominations to join them on the board of Aldersgate Productions.

Over the next 23 years, with Mann as its secretary and producer, Aldersgate presented or co-produced 20 productions either in London or on tour, among them William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*, a play about Helen Keller, Malcolm Muggeridge and Alan Thornhill's *Sentenced to Life*, about euthanasia, and Daniel Pearce's *Song of the Lion*, about the life of C.S. Lewis. Mann secured the rights to adapt Lewis's Narnia novels for the stage and put on *The Lion*, *The Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, all adapted by Glyn Robbins.

Mann had an unusual approach to raising financial backing for his productions. He would hold an exhibition of his most recent paintings and donate

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the proceeds to start off the production fund. He then felt confident in approaching others for money. "I have put in this much – how much will you put in?" was his convincing opening gambit. He was rarely refused.

But he did not confine his fund-raising skills to his own productions. He was very mindful of the struggle of young Christian artists and smaller production companies. So in 1981, again with Gibbs, he founded an ecumenical charitable trust, the Christian Arts Trust. He was its first Secretary, a post he held until 1996. Over the last 16 years the Christian Arts Trust has been able to make modest grants to 30 productions or exhibitions, often at an early and crucial stage in their development.

Born in Fleetwood, on the Lancashire coast, in 1917, Mann attended the Fleetwood Grammar School where he played rugby for the first XV. Leaving school at 16, he began work in the Treasurer's department of the Lancashire County Council in Preston until the outbreak of the Second World War. His family at-



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tended the Methodist church and it was a Methodist minister, the Rev Cecil Rose, who first spoke to him about the Oxford Group and its programme of Moral and Spiritual Rearmament which had been launched in 1938 by F.N.D. Buchman. Mann attended several of the group's weekend "house parties" where he learned the practice of the "quiet time" and listening in silence for God's guidance each day. This practice helped to sustain his spirits in prison camp and especially while living rough and on the run for six months in the Apennine mountains during his escape.

After the war he decided not to return to his secure job at Lancashire County Council, but to throw in his lot with the programme of Moral Rearmament, and its aim to restore morale and unity in war-torn Europe. He spent most of the 1950s working with MRA in Italy, where he renewed contact with many of the people who had helped him during his escape.

In 1953 he married Mary Evans. It was an ideal and lifelong partnership, for she shared his Christian faith, his

passion for the theatre and his commitment to MRA. Mann constantly sought to renew and deepen his personal faith and the hymns of John and Charles Wesley and the practice of listening for God's direction were the twin foundations which sustained him.

He believed that the Holy Spirit never stopped working and that a person guided by the Holy Spirit should never stop working either. He drove himself hard, and was equally demanding of those who chose to work with him. As Lord Coggan wrote in the foreword to *Moving the Mountain*, Mann was "driven by a passion – to share with others the riches which he has found in the Christian way of life". Shortly before his death he completed *Take Off Your Shoes*, a book about his spiritual pilgrimage.

Hugh Williams

Ronald Edwin Mann, theatrical producer and painter: born Fleetwood, Lancashire 29 August 1917; married 1953 Mary Evans (one son); died London 26 June 1998.