



DENSLOW'S BERMUDA FAIRY TALE

After the success of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the book's eccentric illustrator moved to Bermuda where he found inspiration and infamy

BY MICHELLE FARRELL

"Where is Bermuda?" said the Lion anxiously. "Is it a wild place, and is the voyage a dangerous one?"

"Bermuda is the land of sunshine," replied the steward, "a land of bananas, onions and lilies. You will be welcome there, and we will make your trip pleasant. Have no fear and trust in me."

— DENSLOW'S SCARECROW AND THE TINMAN ON THE WATER (1905)

On a July evening in 1905, on a sweltering stage in Boston, Massachusetts, a chorus line of dancing Bermuda lilies rose into the footlights to sing a love letter from a heartsick girl to a missing boy. These ruffled white lilies were remarkably similar to another pretty flower patch come to life, the one of the magical red poppies in the kingdom of Oz.

But no matter. These chorusgirl Easter lilies not only blew up the stage in an otherwise white-bread show they linked two explosive forces: the imagination of William Wallace Denslow — the original illustrator of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, published in 1900 — and the place where he found a welcome and timely muse, the subtropical island of Bermuda. "It is a place for dreamers," he wrote many years later, when this promising Boston night was but a memory.

For a brief time at the turn of the last century, just before the multitudes of tourists showed up, W. W. Denslow — or "Den" to his friends and colleagues

— soaked up the tropical palette of this mid-Atlantic archipelago, finding some respite and inspiration. For an artist who dabbled in the magical and understood the potential of colour to tell a good story, it was a fruitful fit. These were heady times for artists and wannabe explorers. It was a new century, and everyone wanted a slice. For someone like Denslow, with money to spend and in need of a mental-health break, Bermuda proved an agreeable landing spot. He bought himself a piece of it, built a tower and declared himself king. A fanciful turn for a man who worked in fantasy. His very own Oz, if you will. But the pomp obscured a more basic reality:



previous pages: "Pumpkin-head, I command you approach," says the fairy in *The Pearl and the Pumpkin* written by W. W. Denslow and inspired by Bermuda.

left: William Wallace Denslow, famous for illustrating *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* relocated to Bermuda in 1903, where he found beauty and inspiration.

sailor, a grouper turned into a palace guard and a glowing pumpkin rising out of the water like a sparkling sunset. That's Bermuda all right, or at least a highly sensational one.

"They're fun. They're terrific fun," said the late Tim Hodgson, a former Bermuda editor and reporter, whose extensive writings on island history included a 2013 piece on Denslow. "But it's an imaginary Bermuda," he said in interview a few months before his sudden death in December 2019 at age 57. "North Rock (coral reef) full of mermaids, you know. It's just where his imagination led him. But you know it's great. You can say his imagination did lead him there. That he used Bermuda as a source of inspiration." Bermuda not only inspired him it boosted his brand. "He says what he thinks about Bermuda, or he says what he wants people to believe he thinks about Bermuda," Hodgson said. Setting up shop in Bermuda can certainly be something to brag about, be it an overworked artist in 1903 or an expat in finance today. Basking in the year-round sunshine while your East Coast colleagues shiver through winter.

Initially, Denslow's Bermuda stay was simply an attempt to revive his health, his creative spark and his failing marriage. Money from a new Oz show, based on the best-selling book, lined his pocket. It later turned it into something bigger, a place to tell his own colourful tale. "Although it is midwinter, my little daughter and myself at 7 a.m. go off the dock in the clearest and saltiest water in the world," he told a newspaper years later. "This is a specimen of what the Summer Islands are, a land of beauty and joy forever."

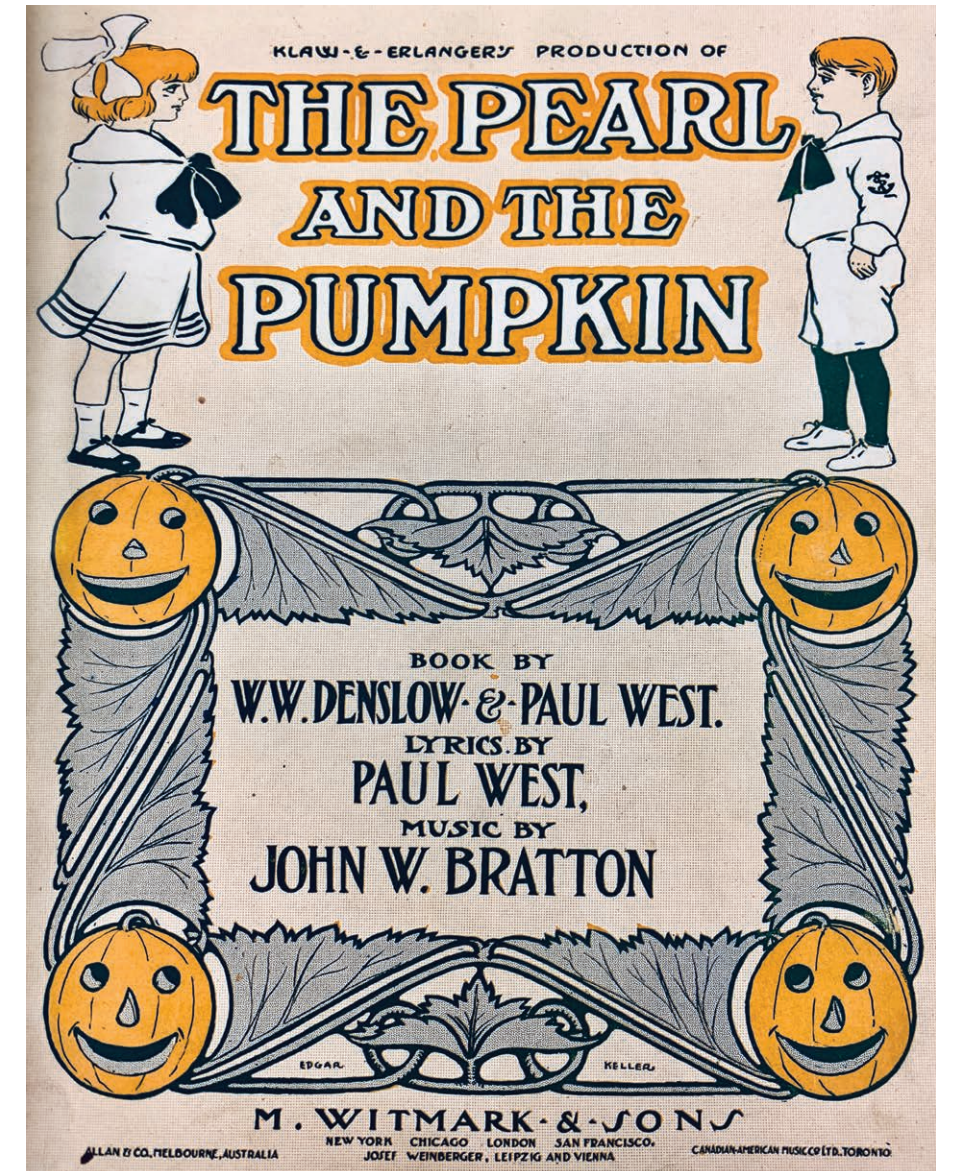
It all began with a brave little girl, some supportive friends and a trip down the Yellow Brick Road. In 1900, three years before those Bermuda dreams, Denslow had teamed up with author L. Frank Baum to create

Inspired by his new island home, Denslow wrote *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*, a Hallowe'en tale featuring dancing Easter Lilies, hungry pirates, a stern-faced grouper, Bermuda's North Rock and a Jack o Lantern as big as a setting sun.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. It was a new book for a new century, dripping with colour and graphics. Wholesome as well, a Kansas wheat field, it launched a brand that would far outlast both men's lifetimes. A Broadway musical soon followed. It made both Baum and Denslow rich men, although an ugly battle over who was most responsible for the Oz success split them apart.

William Wallace Denslow, the famous illustrator — he with the bushy mustache, the boom-ing voice and the snappy attire — needed a place to reset. He found that spot in Bermuda. "You ask me why I like Bermuda," he wrote in 1909. "It is because it is not only the most beautiful spot I have ever found, but also the most healthful." For artists at the turn of the twentieth century, Bermuda was still just raw enough. It made an impression on those looking for an escape or a sanctuary. It could be an out-of-the-way place to show off your wealth, to promote your art, or even to spin a little made-up magic. It's where Denslow, at age 47, came at the top of his career when all things seemed possible.

But he didn't just sip tea in the tropical winter shade. He took part. He built a fairy tale house with a turret. He raced his Bermuda-built boat, named (naturally) the *Wizard*. He took inspiration from the kaleidoscope of



he wrote this book and the concurrent musical about the island and Bermuda was in it and had it worked it would have been great." It was a brief landing — Bermuda sojourns can be that way sometimes — but Denslow's

Denslow peppered his work during this time with images of the island: a natty sailor, a grouper turned into a palace guard and a glowing pumpkin rising out of the water like a sparkling sunset.

island colour and made new art. And it was here that he crowned himself King Denslow I. He actually did that. "He was bonkers as you can tell, but in quite an amiable way, obviously," Hodgson said. "He was great good fun. And Bermuda fired his imagination. So

time on the island would mark him for the few remaining years of his life. He told stories about it. Lots of them. And the Bermuda connection appeared prominently in his obituary, the island escapade being one of the defining aspects of his life. It was a part of who he was.

Broadway, a so-called extravaganza called *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*. Sure, the plot was a bit wonky, but it was a spectacle nonetheless, at least for a few short months. It was here that those lilies turned up:

*In a field of lilies in Bermuda
Knelt a little maid in tears
'Twas Easter Morning in Bermuda,
But her heart was torn with fears.*

In a short-lived comic strip, the Oz characters came to the island, raising havoc and making merry. And there was the book *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*, which preceded the musical, its plot winding its curious way to Bermuda. Denslow peppered his work during this time with images of the island: a natty

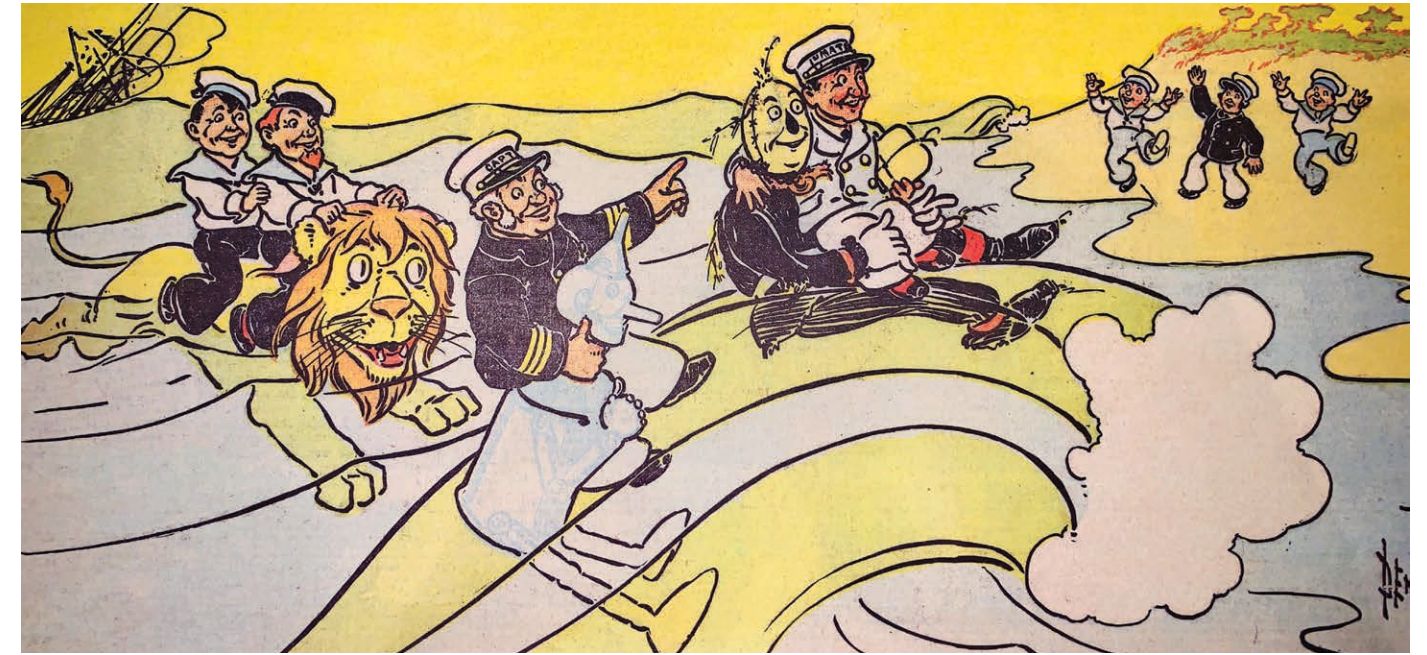
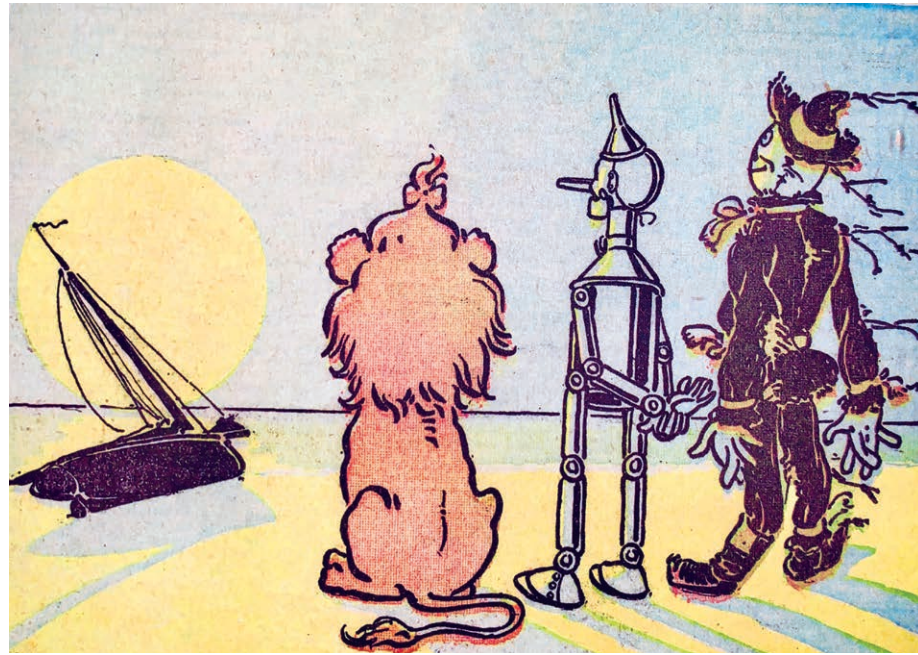
Denslow was very much a working guy during his time in Bermuda, combing the island on land and sea, looking for that spark. His next big thing.

Did he find it? Depends on how you define big. Denslow's late-career, island wanderings didn't produce another classic. His masterpiece had already been made. Nothing he created in Bermuda, or in the last few years of his life for that matter, came anywhere close to the brilliance of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. But the artist did find colour — that Bermuda pink, blue and more — to fire up his imagination. He also found a missing spring to his step; a little island swagger, if you will. And that can go a long way if you know how to work it.

For starters, Denslow took Bermuda to

left: In 1905, Denslow published *The Scarecrow and Tin-Man of Oz* series in which he took the beloved Oz characters on wild and crazy adventures including trips to New Orleans, Bermuda and the Wild West.

right: In Denslow's *Scarecrow and Tin-Man Shipwrecked* (1904) the Oz characters shipwreck on Bermuda's reefs and rescue the ship's crew before enjoying an island vacation.



together, Denslow decided he would focus on illustrating children's books. Soon after, in 1900, came *Oz*. For the first time in a life spent working from job to job, Denslow had money to spare and a best seller on his hands. He was exhausted.

Elise Outerbridge, curator and director of collections at the Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art, said the island has always been a place for artists of a certain means to spend their wealth in the sunshine, a short winter jump from "frost to flowers." "It was also a respite for a lot of people," she said. "I mean, there wasn't much else to do. It was calm.

It was tranquil. It was interesting for artists and writers because it wasn't Florida. You didn't have to take the train. But it was exotic enough. It seemed to appeal to that kind of Bohemian mind." Bermuda was famous for its famous visitors. "[F.] Scott Fitzgerald came down here with *Zelda* and finished *Tender is the Night*. Eugene O'Neill found a lot of comfort here. There have been writers over the years who came because (in Bermuda), you're not in the midst of cacophony."

It began when Queen Victoria's daughter, Princess Louise, arrived in the winter of 1883. In her extended, very private stay, she sketched and painted the island, calling it "a place of eternal spring." The feeling stuck. Tom Butterfield, founder and creative director of Masterworks, said the princess's Bermuda stay set the

stage for the creative types who would arrive later. "That's been my whole take of what I've been trying to get people to understand time and time again. The idea that the muse of the island served writers and served photographers and served painters and served sculptors and, more recently, it served musicians like John Lennon and even David Bowie."

Denslow wrote about Bermuda, talked about Bermuda and sold Bermuda. He put it in his art and embraced it in his lifestyle. "The white houses nestle among the dark green cedar trees and give a contrast to the landscape," he wrote many years later, "while the sea of

footlights of Broadway. Denslow may never have recaptured that *Oz* magic but in Bermuda, he found a place to test out some new ideas, to partake in its tropical bounty and to have a little fun. "The Scarecrow, the Lion and the Tinman were walking one evening on the beautiful beach of the South Shore of Bermuda, just as the great round moon rose and sent a glittering path of silver across the water." —*Denslow's Scarecrow and Tinman Shipwrecked* (February 5, 1905)

Mark Twain wrote in 1877 that "Bermuda was the right country for jaded man to loaf in." For all his quirks, Denslow was not a loaf-

"The Scarecrow, the Lion and the Tinman were walking one evening on the beautiful beach of the South Shore of Bermuda, just as the great round moon rose and sent a glittering path of silver across the water."

— DENSLOW'S SCARECROW AND TINMAN SHIPWRECKED (FEBRUARY 5, 1905)

gorgeous varied light greens, blues and dark browns, where the coral reefs come near the surface, forms the most striking foreground, and the deep blue of the sky completes the picture." A short-lived comic strip with *Oz* characters made a visit to Bermuda; in a children's novel, the plot (incongruously) finds its way to the island. That novel he turned into a "musical extravaganza" meaning that for a brief moment anyway, Bermuda shone in the

er. Not that he didn't like fine things, such as a nice cigar and a beautifully bound book, as his biographers noted. And his Bermuda experience included much self-made luxury. But he was a working artist, there to build on a career at its height. Bermuda images appear in the undersea adventures in *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*, in the elaborate scenery in the stage production, in the yellows and blues in the comic strip's ocean voyages.

His embrace of the water wasn't new; Denslow had been a lover of boats since he was a child growing up along the Hudson River in northern Manhattan. In a magazine article, a friend de-scribed the artist's explorations at North Rock. "In order to get the proper colouring, he painted while swaying in a small boat, his helpers holding water glasses over the surface to prevent ripples." In *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*, Denslow wrote of a magical undersea world, which he would have seen diving at North Rock:

As they crossed the portals, Joe stopped, dazzled by the beauty of the scene. If the outside palace was gorgeous, there were no words to describe the interior. They were in a great hall, formed by countless arches of pink, green, white and yellow coral, through the pillars supporting which shone a soft light that made the walls, ceiling and floor glitter like diamonds.

Less than a month after he arrived in Bermuda in 1903, Denslow wrote to a literary journal back home about his island adventure. "The climate of New York was too rich for my Western blood, and I had to steer for sunnier climes, so I am here in the land of the lily and the onion, the picturesque land of coral houses, white against the dark green of cedar trees, and the land of vivid, brilliant colour," Denslow wrote. Bermuda won him over. "He liked sailing and he really

lapped up the atmosphere there and that's what influenced his work. [The] *Pearl and the Pumpkin* takes place in Bermuda. It starts off in New England but ends up in Bermuda. And he also sends the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman to Bermuda in his comic strip. He really enjoyed being there," said biographer Michael Patrick Hearn, in a telephone interview last year.

No one knows for sure who planted the idea of travelling to Bermuda in Denslow's mind. Hearn said it could have been Elbert Hubbard, founder of the Roycroft campus, an arts and crafts community in upstate New York where Denslow was a contributor. It also seems highly possible that Denslow knew of landscape painter Winslow Homer's two Bermuda trips, which took place between 1899 and 1901. Homer was a nexus for artists coming to Bermuda. In this case, the timing is almost exact.

On January 6, 1903 — two years after Homer's last trip — Denslow arrived in Bermuda, travelling with his then wife Ann on the steamship *S.S. Trinidad*, according to a passenger list published a few days later in the *Royal Gazette*. Less than a month after his arrival, Mr Denslow was already touting the bounty of Bermuda to readers back home. In a published letter dated February 3, he gushed about the glorious Bermuda sunsets.

"It is no wonder that my wife and I, who were pretty well rundown, are improving immensely and feeling better each day." Always looking one step ahead, Denslow also noted that he was busy on his next blockbuster. "I am trying a rather big piece of work, but with the aid of the genial climate will be able to bring it through," he said.

The Denslows stayed that winter at the Inverurie Hotel on Hamilton Harbour, a handy spot for boating expeditions. The artist was already finding colour: an angel fish "in bright blue levant with elaborate gold tooling of unique design" and a lobster coloured like "marbled end paper."

Career-wise, it was a very productive stay. He began work on *Denslow's Picture Book Series*, an 18-volume collection of fairy tales. Whatever the relative success of this first Bermuda trip, it was not enough to save his marriage. Both he and Ann were already in love with other people. She filed for divorce in September. By next winter, however, Denslow had a new bride and even bigger plans. An island fancy was about to turn into something more. Something royal. Enter King Denslow I.

Three months after his divorce from Ann, Denslow married a woman he had met during his 1902 stay at Alma Springs Sanitarium in Michigan, a spa that advertised its healing bromide waters. In a 2015 article about



left and right: In *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*, Denslow sends little Pearl and Joe Miller on an underwater adventure to Bermuda where they encounter, mermaids, fairies, and even North Rock.

the most beautiful kind, oleanders and palms predominating. Sand beaches slope down to the blue ocean from thickly wooded spots; caves of stalactite are found in the most unexpected places, and everything is at hand to make the ideal retreat of which Mr. Denslow dreamed," sang the full-page announcement. Now, as a finishing touch to his tropical fairy tale, Denslow began work on his castle.

His plans were to use native Bermuda white stone to build "an ornamental tower with observatory balcony that will command a view of the whole Great Sound, the bay and Hamilton," he touted in a newspaper that January. "Living out of doors as much as one does there, these will supply very great comfort, and an agreeable change to one who has tasted the sharp air of late fall and early winter of New York." From his turret, Denslow would have had an unencumbered view of Bermuda's spectacular golden sunsets. Hartley Watlington, whose family owns nearby Watling Island, heard the stories of Denslow from his grandfather. "Denslow liked to work in the tower on his island house when it was nice and sunny and not too windy," Watlington said. "It is a nice view from up there. It was before they had the stairs. He had some sort of rope ladder that he would use to get away from his wife and be alone to work."

Denslow's Island, or Bluck's Island as it is called today, is one of 181 in the Bermuda archipelago. Although Denslow initially trumpeted that he had bought the island, he at first only rented it, beginning construction of his house before the sale went through. Like today, Bermuda had restrictions against expats owning property, something Denslow somehow found his way around. The island

was also much smaller than Denslow first proclaimed, a total of four versus ten acres. When he was finally able to buy it in 1910, he had to borrow money from a friend, composer Paul Tietjens, to complete the deal, according to Greene and Hearn's biography. In some respects, it was the perfect time to try something big.

Because he shared *Oz* royalties with Baum—a point of contention between the two—Denslow continued to receive money from *The Wizard of Oz* musical for eight years. He had helped design the costumes of the Tin Man and the Scarecrow for the show, but otherwise was not intimately involved. For the first time in his life he had money pouring in, giving him the freedom to try new things. So, for a brief time, Denslow wrote a newspaper comic strip featuring the *Oz* characters, competing head-to-head with another strip of *Oz* adventures by Baum. Because of that shared copyright, both men felt they had the right to use those characters in other works.

The comic strip, however, was a short-lived project for Denslow. The artist had his sights on bigger things than the newspaper funnies. For starters, there was to be a new book: *The Pearl and the Pumpkin* would be Denslow's



Denslow's Bermuda experience, Jane Albright, president of the International Wizard of Oz Club, wrote that the artist had suffered a nervous breakdown, prompting his stay at the spa. Denslow had also complained of a nervous prostate and rheumatism. "The other woman" from the sanitarium was Frances G. Doolittle of Chicago, "a 32-year-old widow with two children and considered wealthy," according to the article which appeared in *The Baum Bugle*, the club's magazine. The wedding announcement hit the newspapers a few days late because, according to one colourful news report, "Mr. Denslow put the marriage notice into his pocket after the ceremony and forgot about it."

The newlyweds left for Bermuda two weeks later, almost a year after Denslow first arrived with Ann, to spend the winter and their honeymoon. As he had so many times in his life when things didn't work out precisely as planned, Denslow was starting over. To launch this ambitious new phase of his Bermuda enterprise, the artist sent invitations for friends to join him as he set sail for his "new realm." This time, Denslow boasted,

he intended to lay claim to one of Bermuda's small harbour islands. He would rename this new territory, appropriately enough, after himself. He would be "An American King on a Bermuda Island." His "proclamation" published in newspapers across the United States, went like this: "By order of King Denslow I, Monarch of Denslow Island and Protector of the Coral Reefs, the faithful subjects of the King will assemble at the foot of Christopher Street (in Manhattan) to send their monarch on his way, whence he will take his triumphant march to his newly acquired lands in the country of perpetual summer, the same being Denslow Island among the Bermudas." Denslow had found his island the previous

D spring. The "quest" began after chartering a boat out of Hamilton. "If I can find an island that suits me," Denslow said, "what's the matter with making it a kingdom and establishing myself as king, with a select population of subjects? I'll do it." He found what he was looking for in the Great Sound, a small piece of paradise called Dyer's Island. "It is a garden spot, plenteous in foliage of

own follow-up to the *Oz* magic. Something even more spectacular, he promised. He teamed up with Paul West, a journalist and lyricist, to write the plot, which takes place on Hallowe'en night. It opens in Vermont and with plenty of twists and turns, finishes in Bermuda. Even before its October publication, the book was under contract to be turned into a musical by one of the leading producers of the day. Bermuda scenes dot the text of the book, although mostly as background. North Rock appears as Denslow would have seen it on one of his ocean voyages with pilot Joe Powell, before rising sea levels over the next century buried much of it underwater. His palace on Denslow's Island appears in the background as does Gibbs Hill Lighthouse and other Bermuda landmarks. The artist also includes fanciful ocean characters, such as bluefish as doormen, mermaids as actual maids and seahorses as horses. All illustrations are stamped with "Den" and his trademark hippocampus. The plot—something critics of the musical noted later—was less than delightful. "He wasn't much of a writer," said biographer Michael Patrick

Hearn in a telephone interview. "He was no Baum and Paul West was no Baum either. What people remember about *The Pearl and the Pumpkin* are the illustrations."

The Pearl and the Pumpkin musical opened in Boston in July 1905. At the time, *The Wizard of Oz* musical was three years into an eight-year run. *Oz* was the most successful show of its day, according to *The Road to Wicked: The Marketing & Consumption of Oz from Frank Baum to Broadway*. For the next decade, the public clamoured for the "glow" and "tingle" of the *Oz* fantasy, according to this 2018 study. In other words, it was a boon time for anyone with a similar children's story. Never mind someone with a direct *Oz* connection. The producers of *The Pearl and the Pumpkin* put somewhere between \$50,000 and \$70,000 into the show, or around \$1.5 to \$2.1 million in inflated value today. Denslow handled the scenery and the costumes. West contributed the lyrics while composer John W. Bratton wrote the music.

Initial Broadway reviews were glowing: "Its maze of beauty, of color harmonies in brilliant stage pictures, and magnificent



"The Corn Dodger must be found," said Neptune in Denslow's *The Pearl and the Pumpkin*.

didn't get the right storyline. And that was that. He was broke again. He was back to doing magazine covers."

Whatever the artist's motivations, the failure of his Bermuda kingdom was a personal tragedy and remains a source of mockery to his legacy. "I think he probably left here a broken man," said Paul Doughty, a Bermuda maritime historian. "And when you think about somebody who has this kind of imagination and who was so involved in happy-ever-after and fantasy, that he could set himself up to lose big." To be so, "God I could build my castle, I'm king so-and-so the first" and then crash.

And so, the Bermuda fairy tale came to an end. In no time at all, the money ran dry. The artist mortgaged Denslow's Island to Tietjens twice, the second time in 1911 after moving to Buffalo where he had found work with Niagara Lithograph Co. He was never able to pay back the loan and lost the island. Creditors circled; Frances left him. Denslow never returned to Bermuda. Just like that, the kingdom was gone but like so many artists who came and went, he left behind a legacy. His white towered house — where he gazed across the harbour and imagined a childhood adventure to rival Oz — still overlooks the Great Sound today.

And those lilies he brought to life are still there.

A lily field is the prettiest of the appeals in The Pearl and the Pumpkin ... We see at first an expanse of lilies, cultured as they are in Bermuda for the Easter market in America. The light changes slowly, from dawn to sunrise. A girl comes into the field to pluck an armful of the flowers. She sings and dances while doing it. Then the front rows of the lilies pull themselves up from the ground, and are girls, white and dainty as the posies, with fleet feet in place of roots, agile limbs for stalks and smiling faces for the flowers.

—The Salt Lake Herald, August 27, 1905

and tasteful costumes, is consistent with its pretty, catchy music and altogether lively and interesting entertainment." And while "the story begins nowhere and doesn't get far from it," the scenes, the dancing and the "amazing brilliance" makes you forget. But that brilliance didn't save it. The show closed three months after opening. It did better on tour, Greene and Hearn wrote, running for several months, although at a rumored \$55,000 loss for producers. It just didn't work.

Hodgson said he wondered if Denslow had overshot with his elaborate Broadway extravaganza. "The sets were incredible and these people flying around on seahorses, and they spent a fortune on it. I assume the lawyers said, 'Look, the story is too close to

[The] *Wizard of Oz*, blur it here, blur it there.' Well, they did and nobody understood it," Hodgson said. "The tragedy of Denslow is his ego. Instead of sitting back and — I mean Jesus Christ! He was made for life. But he was jealous of Baum, he was jealous of Baum getting the headlines. I mean my God. He worked in the media. He knows it's all make-believe. Just accept that the only byline that matters is the one on your check, mate."

"I think it's awful. He should have died a millionaire out there" on his Bermuda island. "He was hoping for lightning to strike twice. It's not that simple. And he wanted to get out from under Baum's shadow. I assume he felt, 'Well I don't need him. I can do it by myself.' But he didn't get the right associates. He certainly

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