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The Growth And Development Of Children's Literature In Australia: A Brief Survey

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to historically chart the initiation, growth and development of the writings for children in the field of Australian Literature. This includes commentary and critical analysis of the persepectives representations in the works of the White and Aboriginal Australian authors and the crosscurrents involved in the process.

KEYWORDS children's literature, Australian literature, White Australian Authors, Aboriginal Australian Authors.

Introduction

In Australian literature, the settlement discourses related to the establishment of Australia and related adventure stories dominate the initial phase. Rhonda M. Bunbury observes, "The origins of published children's literature in Australia actually lie within the efforts of the monocultured, class-bound English who were conscious of the need to bring civilisation to children of a convict colony" (833). Such White-authored texts were caught up in a tension between two kinds of needs. Bradford observes that on the one hand there was the need "to position child readers as young Australians; and on the other [to] manage the colonial past for children" (Reading Race 15). The "strategies of silence and concealment" practised by White authors for this purpose is exemplified in Eve Pownall's The Australia Book (1951) that received the Australian Children's Book Council's 'Book of the Year' award in 1952 (Braford 15). Illustrated by Margaret Senior, this book is accepted as one of the canonical history books for children. Being a history book for White children, it is concerned with representation of childhood, though the way history is presented to the White children also becomes crucial here. The history here begins only with the arrival of the Whites and gives an impression "as though the country was lost in a kind of limbo before being found [by White men], as though untamed and untouched by humans before being settled" (Bradford Reading Race 18). Such mechanism of placing and allowing strategic gaps and omissions for the sake of presenting a benign myth of Australian settlement history to the young readers continued in the school texts and readers, too, that prevailed under the leadership of State Departments of Education. Exploration narratives were accompanied here with maps which were constructed to show the journeys in uninhabited territories. Exploration and adventure narratives, whether written by male or female White authors, were also explicitly discriminatory about gender issues. Since these works represented the imperial

enterprise of discovering new lands as a purely masculine affair, women figures were rarely to be found in them. Examples are Anne Bowman's The Kangaroo Hunters (1859), Edward B. Kennedy's Blacks and Bushrangers (1889) and Hesba Brinsmead's Longtime Passing (1971) where women adorn only the familial domestic space to which the male heroes come back to receive nursing for the bruises they get in fighting with Aborigines during their journeys. These works reiterate the issues of stereotypical masculinity and racial dominance to the White children readers. Captivity narratives of Eliza Fraser and others reiterate in an autobiographic mode the savagery of Aborigines while the Aboriginal autobiographies, like Sally Morgan's My Place (1987), Robert Bropho's The Fringedweller (1980) present the other side of the frontier of White settlement in Australia. Religious texts, however, credited the existence of Aborigines only to depict their development through conversion into Christianity which was identified with "government policies and strategies for managing Aborigines" (Bradford Reading Race 48). Narratives of conversion were common in White authored texts like E. Davenport Cleland's The White Kangaroo (1890) and George Sargent's Frank Layton (1865). In general, there is a common trend of poor treatment of Aborigines and Aboriginal themes with stereotypical Aboriginal and White characters in all these works. The young White readers were provided only with the non-Aboriginal dominant adult viewpoints emphasising the strange and exotic elements about Aboriginality.

During the early years of White settlement in Australia, children's literature – both for school textbooks and for other books – was solely dependent on the supply of books authored and published in Britain. Such supply naturally had nothing to contribute to the idea of Australianness among the readers. Till 1950s, the purpose of the school readers, published by the Education Departments, was, as Charles Long mentions in Victorian Readers, "to be taken in imagination to various parts of the empire, to Europe, and to the United States of America, and thus to gain knowledge of their rich heritage and acquire a well-founded pride of race" (qtd. in Bradford Reading Race 290). Clare Bradford points out that the first ever children's book to be published in Australia—A Mother's Offering to Her Children (1841) by Charlotte Burton—was almost after a century from the initiation of children's literature publication in Britain in 1744 with A Little Pretty Pocket Book by British publisher John Newbery (Reading Race 283).

A Mother's Offering to Her Children records the conversations of a White mother and her children about the geographical, natural and cultural aspects of Australia and its natives in a didactic mode. Addressed to White children, the descriptions here are "of a cultured British migrant viewing the new land through British eyes" (Bradford Reading Race 285). A Mother's Offering to Her Children is also an example of such female authored texts where the White authors create the images of good mothers, "concerned with the feminine work of educating the young", only to contrast with the images of Aboriginal mothers to show the "gulf between civilisation and savagery" (Bradford Reading Race 83).

During this early stage, narratives of adventurous expeditions, shipwreck and finally of kidnap and captivity in the hands of the Aborigines carried out the purpose of informing the intended young White readers about the real nature of the new land. In these works, Aborigines are represented sometimes as "barbaric figures intent on murdering travellers", sometimes as "comic relief", "good natives" or as "half-caste, or brown child [...] torn between two cultures because of mixed racial heritage" (Bradford Reading Race 287). Jeannie Gunn's The Little Black Princess (1905) represents the otherness of Aboriginal childhood as amusing to the implied young White readers. Here the depiction of Aborigines as inferior human beings, according to Bradford, "positions readers as young colonials" (Reading Race 287). Richard Rowe's The Boy in the Bush (1869) is an adventure story where the Aborigines are portrayed as "generally savages, cannibals" (Bradford Reading Race 6). Ethel Turner's Seven Little Australians (1894), published from England, tries to explore the Australianness by exploring the bush culture. The story of the novel centres round the escapades of the children of a White family and their subsequent adventures. Instead of being murderous, Aborigines here are seen to be helpful in conformity with the "colonial trope of loyal black servant who demonstrates the benevolence of his masters" (Bradford Reading Race 288). Clare Bradford points out that an Aboriginal story, which was originally a part of the book in its 1894 edition, was omitted in the edition of 1900 (Reading Race 4). This omission is actually an act of appropriation by "institutional gatekeepers" and exemplifies the susceptibility of White representation of Aboriginality to Western perspectives (MacCann xviii). Portrayals and treatments of settlement violence history and issues relating to contact of cultures have since been remaining a matter of concern for authors of Australian children's literature.

Another kind of depiction of the bush life and culture is found in Mary Grant Bruce's the Billabong books series which was initiated by the publication of A Little Bush Maid in 1910. The compilation of fifteen books in this series published as Billabong Riders in 1942 stood as a great rival of the popularity of the works of Turner who kept writing till 1928. Billabong series shows the reformative journey of city-dwelling characters through their bush experiences at Billabong that represents real Australia, exoticised according to the European perceptions. The representation of Aboriginal childhood here is much like a continuation of Turner's works and is in accordance with the hierarchies of race, gender and class. Angus & Robertson republished the Billabong series in 1993 with new illustrations. Apart from a pointer to its popularity, this event of republication is also important as the text was modified in 1993 to omit "offensive expressions" about Aboriginality (Bradford Reading Race 41). This event of omission is ideologically just the opposite to the omission of the Aboriginal story from Seven Little Australians in 1900. Bradford observes that the "publisher's changes to the Billabong books also raise question about their views of the books' implied readers" as the readership of Aboriginal children multiplied between the years 1900 and 1993 (Reading Race 44).

Romance and fantasy fiction bore the common trend of White authors trying to inform non-Aboriginal readers about Aboriginal concepts, like the Dreaming, by positioning themselves as authorities of the culture. This resulted in stereotyping and Indigenising for the sake of exoticisation. Brooke Collins-Gearing in her essay "Imagining Indigenality in Romance and Fantasy Fiction for Children" comments that "representations of Indigenous culture and people in fantasy and romance narratives are based on narrative practices which are informed by Western society and its values" (32). Representation of Aboriginality and Aboriginal childhood is often motivated by the purpose of projecting Aborigines as a dying race and, for this, elements of Aboriginal culture are carefully selected or rejected in the narratives according to the moral, social and political scheme of the author. Mary A. Fitzgerald's King Bungaree's Pyalla and Stories Illustrative of Manners and Customs that Prevailed Among Australian Aborigines (1891) is one of the earliest examples of this kind of writing. Here the "narrative records Indigenality as belonging to a past time that is slowly vanishing, a construction which presents the idea that a harmonious, but brief, relationship existed in the early days of colonization between colonists and Indigenous peoples. In this way Fitzgerald's fantasy narratives about black/white relationships absolve non-Indigenous child readers from the memory and knowledge of policies and practices of genocide and assimilation" (Collins-Gearing 32). Situating romance and fantasy fictions in the past remained a common strategy among the authors even in twentieth century to avoid the contemporary issues. By taking advantage of the conventions of this genre, unspoilt and blissful pastoral representation of Aboriginal childhood is also found in the twentieth century. Frank Dalby Davison's Children of the Dark People (1936) is an example of such idyllic representations. Portrayal of settler's virtues employed to the betterment of Aborigines was another common trope in the fantasy fictions for children. Ethel Pedley's Dot and the Kangaroo (1899), May Gibbs's Snugglepot and Cuddlepie (1918), Norman Lindsay's The Magic Pudding (1918) and Dorothy Wall's Blinky Bill (1933) are examples where virtues of settler characters have been portrayed through anthropomorphised Australian animal characters.

The Children's Book of the Year Award which started in 1946 and the establishment of Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) in 1958 encouraged children's literature production and "by the 1990s at least one in ten books in Australian literature were written for children" (Bennett 257). Whitlam government's 'Multicultural Australia' policy, launched in 1973, gave the impetus to the publications of children's books promoting cultural diversity by exploring race relations to cater to the potential market of multicultural young consumers. Bradford observes that the "dying race" trope waned out in the second half of the twentieth century and Rex Ingamell's adventure narrative Aranda Boy (1952) exemplifies authentic representation of Aboriginal childhood in spite of adhering to principles of "white superiority" and "benevolent white rule" ("Australian Children's Literature" 297). Donnarae MacCann terms this attitude as "paternalistic racism" where "good intentions coupled with white standards, a white

perspective, and an assumption of white superiority" (xxvi-ii). Patricia Wrightson tried to replace the "Western metaethic[s]" of fantasy literature for children in An Older Kind of Magic (1972) and in her novels of the Wirrun trilogy—The Song of Wirrun-The Ice is Coming (1977), The Dark Bright Water (1979) and Behind the Wind (1981) (Stephens and McCallum 7).[1] In describing the adventures of Wirrun, the hero, she took honest efforts in employing "another kind of magic, a kind that must have been shaped by the land itself at the edge of Australian vision" (qtd. in Bradford "Australian Children's Literature" 297). These efforts were not always completely independent of European influences which gave way slowly to more and more realistic representations of White-Aboriginal race relations that are found in the literature produced from 1990s onwards in the writings of James Moloney, Phillip Gwynne and Pat Lowe.

Emergence of Aboriginal authors in the 1960s was crucial in breaking the clichéd formula of representing Aboriginal culture. The first children's book under Aboriginal authorship was a picture book, The Legends of Moonie Jarl (1964), by Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller. Oodgeroo's Stradbroke Deamtime (1972) and The Rainbow Serpent (1975), Dick Roughsey's The Giant Devil-Dingo (1973) were the next to follow. All these works suffered in the hands of major publishing houses since they tried to modify the indigenousness of these works to cater to the need of the non-indigenous readers who were at that time the main consumers of all sorts of indigenous art. It was not until Indigenous publishing houses like Magbala Books and IAD Press came into being that the establishment of culturally different literature was uncompromisingly produced. The role of Aboriginal Arts Board was crucial in the publication of one of the landmark works in Aboriginal children's literature, The Aboriginal Children's History of Australia (1977). The then chairman of AAB, Wandjuk Marika, wished to awaken "Aboriginal children ... to an awareness of ... identity and pride in their past" by incorporating "written and painted contributions from Aboriginal children from forty-nine schools around Australia" (Toorn 40). Daisey Utemorrah and Pat Torres's Do Not Go Around the Edges (1990) freely employs Aboriginal narrative strategies in a most striking way to destroy stereotyped White narrative modes:

> Utemorrah's autobiographical story is placed along the bottom of the pages, while her poems are placed in the body of each page, framed within Pat Torres' illustrations. The border that runs along the lower edge of each page features the

[1] This expression was originally used by John Stephens and Robyn McCallum to describe the European influences that inform the construction of mythological, legendary or fairy tales (Stephens and McCullam 6-9).

> three sacred beings known in Wunambal culture as Wandjinas, orienting the various narrative and thematic strands of the book in relation to the ancient stories of the Dreaming. Relationships between these strands are elusive, as most of the poems in the book connect only tangentially with Utemorrah's autobiographical story. Readers accustomed to the reading practices usual in Western picture books will search in vain for thematic and symbolic interactions between verbal and visual texts, and this very complexity disrupts any simplistic notion that Do Not Go Around the Edges can be read as a mixture or blending of elements from different cultures. Rather, its multiplicity of narratives and systems of meaning destabilises the domination of British culture and standard English. (Bradford, "Australian Children's Literature" 298-9)

Lionel Forgarty's Booyooburra (1993) is full of colloquialised Aboriginal English and Aboriginal artist Sharon Hodgson's illustrations to represent the author's inclination towards oral culture. Aboriginal artist Bronwyn Bancroft enriched children's books by illustrating celebrated works like Oodgeroo's Stradbroke Dreamtime and Sally Morgan's Dan's Grandpa with illustrations that make Aboriginal culture come alive. My Girragundji (1998), Maybe Tommorrow (1998) and The Binna Binna Man (1999) by Meme McDonald and Boori Pryor are examples of collaborative works of Aboriginal and White authors. They successfully locate their stories in Aboriginal cultural domain and often employ non-European narrative and discursive traditions.

As an author of children's literature, Jack Davis incorporates different facets of Aboriginality, like oral traditions, language, song, music, dance and other cultural elements to inculcate the ideological system of Aboriginality into young readers and audiences. Though he was writing his plays in the 1980s, when Aboriginal readership grew to a considerable number, he meant his plays primarily to be staged than to be published between the covers to exploit the added advantage of this literary form to directly re-present his culture through the performances. Along with the growth of Aboriginal readership and publication units, the 1980s is also notable for being the initial stage of multicultural Australia and the decade of Aboriginal protests against the bicentennial celebrations of White settlement in Australia. As a children's author, Davis takes effort in solving the racial conflict in his children's plays to reach a harmonious state at the ends of the plays. The readings of the children's plays reveals that, unlike other plays of Davis, his children's plays promote Aboriginality without reiterating the issue of wronged past that preoccupies his all other plays. The fact that his firebrand re-appropriational stance as an Aboriginal playwright is replaced with a reconciliatory approach in these plays indicates Davis's success as an author for children.

On the other hand Davis's representations of childhood in his adult plays portray childhood under the corruptive influence of the White culture and even the Aboriginal adults inside the families. In these plays Davis is uncompromisingly realistic in his

portrayal of the issues related to Aboriginal politics. Hence, the children characters here suffer a premature contamination of the evils and maturity of the adult world.

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