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Of education, the bush and other strange creatures: Environmental conservation in Australian fairy tales

Abstract:

Fairy tales were late to appear in the Australian context but they quickly reflected contemporary concerns over the treatment of the native flora and fauna. Writers of early Australian fairy tales promoted the conservation of the Australian environment, educated children in the realities of living in the harsh Australian landscape and warned of the dangers that humans posed to the native animal population. This article posits that this movement in fairy tales was due to contemporary changes in curriculum and attitudes towards children's education, and a growing sense of nationalism post-Federation in 1901 that tied the Australian identity to the landscape.

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Keywords:

Econationalism – Conservation – Fairy tales – Australia

Fairy tales as a genre were late to appear in Australia in comparison to Europe. Yet the tales were remarkably quick to reflect the 'moral pulse' (Zipes 2012: ix) of the contemporary community Down Under. From as early as the late nineteenth century, Australian fairy tales reveal a deep-rooted concern for the preservation of the native flora and fauna and would continue to promote this concern well into the twentieth century. The writers of Australian fairy tales may have initially found it difficult to represent the environment with accuracy, but as with other writers of Australian children's literature, the native bushland was always a focal point (Saxby 1998: 392)[1]. This article will establish that through a combination of changes towards children's education and an early twentieth century rise in nationalism, Australian fairy tales began to promote the conservation of the native environment through a 'pro-bush cause' (Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995: 59). Australian fairy tales highlighted environmental issues such as the impact of settlement on the landscape and the human threat towards and imprisonment of native animals. Writers also attempted to educate children in nature studies and the realities of living in the Australian environment, while encouraging young readers to care for the environment.

Australian fairy tales did not appear in Australia until the late nineteenth century, yet the fairy-tale genre was already established in western children's literature and often incorporated moralistic and educational messages. This was mainly due to the influence of the Grimms' tales, which were referenced as models for childhood growth (Bottigheimer 1987). In Australia, children's literature was influenced by contemporary educational theory and frequently included elements of natural history (Saxby 1998), coupled with protectionist messages. Narratives including fairy tales were viewed as a natural medium through which to teach the natural sciences (Saxby 1998). This was partially motivated by the publication of the periodical, *The School Papers* (1898–), by the Victorian government and other state departments, encouraging writers to educate children on Australian flora and fauna (Saxby 1998). The desire to educate children through narrative was formalised through changes to the Australian school curricula by the early twentieth century (Holden 1992). Popular fairy-tale writers such as Annie Rentoul (sister to Ida Rentoul Outhwaite) frequently featured in such educational publications. *The School Papers* followed the creation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals across the states and territories in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The organisation was cemented with a Royal Warrant in 1923 to become known as the RSPCA (RSPCA 2015). It was during this time that the conservation elements in Australian fairy tales really began to come forth.

In particular, using cute and cuddly stories of native animals to inspire conservation was mirrored in the early twentieth century English conservation movements, inspired by the tales of Beatrix Potter. The representation of the hedgehog in Beatrix Potter's works, for example, had a 'vast influence on the popular perception of the hedgehog … as an eccentric and attractive creature' (Desblache 2011: 76) and positioned the hedgehog as an animal to be protected. Just as Beatrix Potter's characters had an impact on contemporary perceptions of flora and fauna, writers of Australian fairy tales were having a similar influence, although this would not be seen until after Federation in 1901.

With children's literature publishing in its infancy in Australia, there was a clash of European, British and Australian representations of the native landscape by the beginning of the twentieth century. An influx of Australian fairy tales that highlighted the natural environment would have both proved educational and practical in diluting the amount of literary representations of the environment created wholly from fancy, as was common at the time (Saxby 1998). Australian animals were described in scientific terms, with authors often taking every opportunity to describe them in great detail (Park 1962: 7 and Whitfield 1898: 162-3). A 1930 Australian retelling of the Goldilocks and the Three Bears tale, for example, contains an accompanying section on koala facts and conservation suggestions (Cinesound Productions 1930: 24). Authors also prefaced their tales with appeals to their child audience that they engage in the study of natural history. While early writers like K. Langloh Parker did not directly advocate the conservation of the environment, her attempt to record native Indigenous names and descriptions of the landscape shows an intention to create a serious collection of Australian natural history with the hope that it '[would] gain the attention of, and have some interest for, children' (1896: 12). In the opening of Olga Ernst's *Fairy tales from the land of the wattle* (1904), she offers her stories 'in the hope that they will not only amuse the young, but also win the approval of those to whom a loving study of tree and flower, bird and insect...commend themselves' (qtd. in Saxby 1998: 327). Similarly, Peg Maltby wanted 'to further children's interest and appreciation of the beauties of nature, the fairy world, and little animals' (qtd. in Holden and Mackenzie 1989: 11). Encouraging young readers to care for the environment reflected the changing attitudes towards the content of children's education and representation of the Australian landscape.

In the mid-twentieth century the most recognisable author of the conservation movement in Australia, May Gibbs, was more direct in her approach to educating her readers. Her stories have been universally hailed as an iconic mix between a celebration of the native environment and a vehicle for voicing her concern over the treatment of it (see, for example, Holden and Mackenzie 1989, Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995). She directly addresses her readers and implores them to care for the natural environment: 'Humans: please be kind to all bush creatures and don't pull flowers up by the roots' (Gibbs 1947: n.p.). Her emotional responses to the destruction of the environment made her able to appeal to even the youngest of intended readers, educating them on the value of the bush and the imperative need to care for it (Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995). Her characters show a keen interest in caring for the landscape, no doubt so that young readers might emulate their actions. For example, Bill in *Prince Dande Lion: A garden whim-wham* says passionately: 'I've been learning about plants and things, and the more I knows, the more there is to learn' (Gibbs 1953: 5). By directing her child readers to care for the environment and learn as much as possible about the natural world, her works stand as exemplars of how fairy tales in Australia reflected educational and conservation concerns. Her tales also reflect contemporary environmental issues, as will be further discussed.

While Australian fairy tales openly encouraged child readers to protect the native environment, they were also pragmatic in their approach to educating readers on the realities of living in the Australian landscape. Just like the worlds of British writers such

as Beatrix Potter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the environment represented in Australian fairy tales was not simply 'a cosy, protected space' (Cosslett 2006: 1). The bush is shown as a legitimate threat to the human population and characters in the tales are reminded that it is a dangerous place to be avoided at all costs. Whitfield and Mack portray the bush as a danger to native animals due to predators (1898: 33 and 1910: 66). One of the main threats to the human and animal population is the threat of natural disasters. JM Whitfield, in particular, attempts to educate children on the dangers of bush fires in 'The Spirit of the Bush Fire' where she represents the bush fire as a fantastical event created by a 'mischievous spirit' (1898: 6). The spirit of the bush fire decides to wreak havoc in response to the clearing of trees and burning off of grass, yelling 'Why can't they leave things alone? I'd like to burn them all up, that I would' (Whitfield 1898: 2). Whitfield's depiction of the bush fire is unusual, as she creates a mischievous and often likeable character. As the narrative progresses, however, it is in describing the effects of the fires that Whitfield becomes pragmatic. The fire kills all animals who cannot seek shelter (Whitfield 1898: 6) and displaces the human population in the space of a few pages. For the humans, Whitfield emphasises that the cost of bush fires is high; a motherly character laments that 'to-morrow we may be roofless, homeless, ruined' (1898: 7).

Later, Grenbry Outhwaite (husband to famed Australian fairy illustrator Ida Rentoul Outhwaite) would similarly characterise natural disaster as the action of spirits, citing drought as a 'very cruel and wicked spirit' (1926: 59). While his representation of drought is far from realistic, his depictions unusually contain an element of hope for the human and animal population. He writes that whenever drought or other spirits strike the landscape, the spirits of flooding and rain always follow (Outhwaite 1926: 59-60). Similarly, Ethel English captures the precious and surprising nature of Australian rain after drought season: 'some of the men were on the veranda, and went literally mad with joy for a time, as the rain meant so much to them, and it was the break up of the drought' (1926: 39). May Gibbs gives perhaps the most practical representation of drought in Australia with her signature mix of comedy and concern:

> The burden of the drought lay heavily on the Creatures in Gumnut Town. There were stern water restrictions. Notices pasted on the walls in the town said: 'Creatures, save the water.' 'Creatures, take care of the drips, the gallons will take care of themselves.' 'Creatures, bathe one-half one day, and one-half the next.' 'Creatures, wear your clothes first one side and then the other.' 'Creatures, use dry shampoo'. (1955: 25)

Although her vision of the perpetual Australian drought is comical in its suggestions for conserving water, the town is 'homologous with a human society' (Bradford 2009: 125). The tale invites a parallel with the human experience of drought, making it easier for child readers to relate to. For the intended child reader, the Australian fairy tale is far from fantasy. It is a reminder of the reality of living in the Australian climate. These tales have the common thread of showing children the dangers of the Australian environment, from predators to natural disasters, with varying degrees of severity and pragmatism in their representation. By including elements of such natural history, and warning readers of the natural disasters that the Australian landscape was (and still remains) prone to, Australian fairy-tale authors responded to changing attitudes towards children's education. With most children's literature obtainable in Australia still being

produced in Britain in the early twentieth century, this was especially important considering how vastly different Australia's landscape was to typical representations of the British environment.

Australian fairy tales also reflected an increased sense of national identity, one that was concerned with a connection to the land. Conserving the native landscape also served to conserve the sense of what it meant to be Australian. The environmental conservation promoted in the fairy tales was also aligned with a general rise in nationalism Post-Federation. Federation marked the point in history when the image of the 'noble bushman' (Ward 1958: 212) was entrenched in Australian media and would continue to be promoted into the twentieth century. Conceptualisations of contemporary Australia were not complete without the representation of the indigenous landscape. This was despite the fact that home as an expression could still refer to Britain well into the twentieth century (Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995). Whilst the earliest examples of conservation in Australian fairy tales appear just before and after Federation, most of the environmentally concerned tales were written roughly between 1925 and 1950[2], then sporadically spread out over the second half of the century. Like the fairy tale itself, perhaps using fairy tales to promote environmentalism simply took a little longer to emerge in Australia.

Post-Federation, the Australian landscape was embedded in a process of codification by confident writers who were keen to promote the 'pro-bush cause' (Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995: 59). Franklin labels the subsequent 'eco-nationalism' (2006: 122) and conservation efforts of the mid-twentieth century 'a period of intensification and purification of Australianness' (122). Despite the prevailing anxieties over land ownership, Australians could now claim to be carers of the landscape (Franklin 2006). In colonised societies like Canada, Australia and the United States the vast untamed landscapes were initially viewed by colonial settlers as unnerving and as a threat to settled areas, but later developed into icons of nationalism (Clark 2011). In this way, the promotion of settled areas as superior is inverted in favour of the wilderness, 'praising the primeval quality of untamed nature and stressing its regenerative effect upon civilisation' (Kauffman qtd. in Clark 2006: 26). Whereas, in the early twentieth century, the native Australian environment had been treated by white writers as a threat to the settled metropolis, now it was something to be protected and nurtured, just like the growing sense of national identity.

With a growing sense of national identity nurturing a connection with the native environment, Australian fairy tales also began to critique colonisation's negative impact upon the landscape. The white Australian population is held accountable in the stories for the destruction of the environment for, with colonial settlement, Australian fairy and native creatures have to clean up the humans' mess (English 1926: 8; Ida Rentoul and G. Outhwaite 1929: 28 and Mystery 1943: 54). May Gibbs' gumnuts, Bib and Bub, send their neighbour's rubbish back to him via post, claiming 'He'll think it's something to eat!' (1927: 14). More recently, John Marsden and Shaun Tan's *The rabbits* (1998) more explicitly portrayed the impact of settlement upon the landscape: 'They ate our grass...They chopped down our trees and scared away our friends' (25-26). Shaun Tan's illustrations reveal the destructive aftermath of colonisation by stripping the landscape of the warmth apparent in his opening images and leaving it

'empty' (32). The colour in the illustrations is expunged from the pages and the landscape is left lifeless. Marsden and Tan's tale reflects a more recent cultural push to recognise the failures of settlement and promote reconciliation with Indigenous populations. By revealing the damage to the native landscape, these tales, in varying degrees, acknowledge Australia's colonisation as a destructive invasion.

Colonisation was not the only threat to the native Australian flora and fauna. The human population in Australian fairy tales depict humans as harbingers of death to the environment. Amy Mack's character Roley the frog is told sternly by his mother 'your two worst enemies…are little boys and snakes' (1910: 57). In many of the fairy tales, animals are advised to avoid settled areas and seek safety in the bush. Seeking refuge in the bush is presented as a way of escaping the threat that humans pose against the native animal population 'for men very rarely come to this part of the country' (Whitfield 1898: 163), as well as being '[the] only way to get any privacy!' (Over 1945: 17). The threat of hunting is one of the main concerns in the fairy tales, affecting both the fairy and native animal populations in Australia. Grenbry Outhwaite's character 'Serana the bush fairy' (1931) laments that 'Saddest of all was the cruel crack of the gun which the fairies would hear every now and then, because that meant they had lost another of their bird or animal friends' (48). Koalas, for example, feature especially as prey in the first half of the twentieth century tales. Hunted for their fur from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, it was not until the 1930s that the trade ceased and state governments made measures to protect the koala population (Australian Government. Department of Environment n.d: 5).

Jessie Whitfield's 'Poor little native bear,' from *The spirit of the bush fire and other Australian fairy tales* (1898), Ethel Pedley's *Dot and the kangaroo* (1899) and Dorothy Wall's Blinky Bill tales are graphic in their depiction of gun violence towards animals. The death of Whitfield's 'Little native bear' is described in detail: 'Nine times was the poor little animal wounded before he could be made to go. Then he dropped, and Toby, the fox terrier, rushed at him and killed him' (1898: 169). Whitfield places further emphasis on the pointless nature of using guns by noting that the koala's fur and skin was not even good enough for sale (1898: 170). The detail with which Whitfield describes the slow slaughter of the young koala is shocking considering it is a narrative intended for children.

Pedley's kangaroo in *Dot and the kangaroo* bluntly describes the killing of native animals as outright 'murder' (1899: 52). Dot initially blames the Indigenous population for the mistreatment of native animals; her kangaroo widens the blame to the settler population, noting that 'all humans are the same underneath' (67). Foster, Finnis and Nimon cite *Dot and the kangaroo* as a benchmark in Australian children's literature for the promotion of animal conservation rather than their exploitation (2005: 5).

Dorothy Wall's first narratives of Blinky Bill in *Blinky Bill: The quaint little Australian* (1933) highlight the impact of hunting koalas as she narrates the birth of her protagonist. The chapter, 'A tragedy,' opens with a lamentation:

> The koala family lived so happily...they had no idea such things as guns were in the world or that a human being had a heart so cruel that he could take pleasure in seeing a poor little body riddled with bullets hanging helplessly from the tree-top. (1933: 12)

By referring to the violent nature of hunting so openly, including describing the koala's 'poor little body riddled with bullets' (1933: 12), Wall leaves her young audience in no doubt of the dangers that humans pose to innocent native animals. The three authors make no effort to shield their young audiences from the violence of hunting, rather they highlight it as an abhorrent practice only conducted by 'cruel animals' (Whitfield 1898: 163). Humans are not only a threat because of their destruction of the environment through settlement, but also for their fondness for hunting native animals. Attitudes towards hunting in these tales continue to be evident in the contemporary Australian concern for the welfare of native animals.

Fairy-tale writers also campaigned for the protection of native Australian animals, increasingly iconic Australian figures, from captivity. The growing sense of a national identity post-Federation strengthened the connection with native flora and fauna, in stark contrast to the attitudes of the nineteenth century, which represented the Australian environment as exotic and alien. Amy Mack's 'How Jimmie spent Christmas Eve' from *Waterside stories* (1910) stands out as an early example. The young protagonist Jimmie falls asleep on Christmas Eve and wakes up with the ability to speak with the animals. Mack spends most of the tale, through the mouthpiece of the zoo animals, lecturing her protagonist on the experience of being in captivity: 'it is being shut up in a little, poky cage, with not a sign of a tree or stream' (1910: 89). A kangaroo criticises the treatment of native animals after colonisation, used as a symbol for the Indigenous experience of colonisation. Kangaroos are frequently used as a voice of reason in Australian fairy tales, most likely due to their iconic status as unquestionably Australian 'oddities' (Saxby 1998: 69). The kangaroo in Mack's tale proclaims:

> But how would you like to be a prisoner in your own country? That is what I am. My fathers owned this land before any white Humans came, and we used to live so happily out on the wide western plains, or in the bush where the great gum trees grow. And yet here I am now, a captive in my own country. Oh, it is a terrible thing; that people who call themselves Australian, should treat an Australian animal in such a way! (1910: 90)

While her tale reflects the early twentieth century tendency to use animals to symbolise the Indigenous Australian population, the kangaroo's reference to 'people who call themselves Australian' is a direct attack on the general public post-Federation who were engaging in the 'discursive strategy' (Bradford 1997: 89) of ignoring Indigenous peoples and their experience of colonisation. By coupling Australian identity with the mistreatment of native animals, Mack's tale promotes the manifestation of a new strain of national pride tied to the conservation of the same animals.

Decades later, Dorothy Wall's Blinky Bill would be introduced by the author as having 'escaped from the zoo! Yes, escaped!' (1939: 347) citing that 'he is in the bush again…I really think that he has become fifty times worse [in naughtiness] since he lived at the zoo. I suppose it is the environment…' (347). Using her protagonist koala and his kangaroo companion, Splodge, Wall romanticises their escape from the zoo back to the bush:

> Sometimes he [Splodge] dipped his nose in the water without drinking just to feel the delight of the clear cold stream, just to make sure once more that he was back in the bush. Daylight was heralded by the laugh of the kookaburras and the glorious notes of

> the magpies. All birdland awoke with a song in its heart…'What is joy it is to be home again' his eyes said as they roved all over his surroundings. (1939: 359)

Using iconic Australian animals to campaign for the release of animals in captivity inextricably ties their welfare to the developing Australian identity. By promoting their return to the bush, Australian fairy-tale writers could cultivate an Australian identity that promoted their free-roaming native fauna.

In particular, May Gibbs champions animal rights and criticises animal imprisonment through her stories of Gumnut Town. One of Gibbs's iconic gumnuts, Cuddlepie, shows the child reader that 'just because we are little' (1947: 215) size does not affect a person's ability to feel for other creatures. Her gumnuts are presented to the young reader, unlike human characters, as role model caretakers of the environment. In *Nuttybub and Nittersing* the inhabitants of Gumnut Town stage a protest against the capture of animals by humans. Although presented in a mildly comical manner, the Old Bird who is head of the town yells: 'Traps, Snakes, Harness, Cages; bad things; make us strong! ...Break 'em, splinter 'em, uproot 'em, burn 'em!' (Gibbs 1932: 69). Compared to other tales concerning environmental conservation, Gibbs's ability to give humanity some redeeming qualities is almost unique. Her rare human characters aiding the gumnuts and other characters are often children, further reinforcing her message that children are not only capable of caring, but have an obligation to care for the Australian landscape. In another Gumnut Town story, the 'monster human' (Gibbs 1947: 38) releases a possum from a trap, much to the amazement of the little gumnuts. The recurring human character Miffrend also acts as a protector of the creatures in the tales. As Gibbs' iconic characters were so intrinsically connected to the Australian landscape, the tales promote the maintenance of an Australian identity tied with care for and protection of the native environment. They also have an educational value in their promotion of environmental conservation. Her connection with the Australian environment is an emotional one (Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995), which is perhaps part of what makes her tales so accessible to generations of Australians, young and old.

While fairy tales might have been late to appear in the Australian context, they were quick to reflect the concerns of the time. Fairy-tale writers in Australia educated children in natural history, the dangers of living in the Australian landscape and the human threat to the animal population through settlement, hunting and captivity. With changes to the school curriculum that emphasised a study of nature and a growing sense of post-Federation nationalism connected to the preservation of the native flora and fauna, Australian fairy tales were one of the vehicles through which writers could promote their 'pro-bush' cause (Foster, Finnis and Nimon 1995: 59). Authors like Ethel Pedley, Jessie Whitfield and Dorothy Wall made no effort to sugar-coat the realities of violence towards the iconic Australian animals. This conservation ethos aligns with the general growth of 'eco-nationalism' (Franklin 2006: 122), which was seen in Australia Post-Federation in 1901. May Gibbs's stories of Gumnut Town and iconic characters make her arguably the most well-known writer of the movement. In maintaining and encouraging the conservation of the native environment, a sense of the Australian identity could be preserved. Most of all, Australian fairy-tale writers encouraged an affection for the native landscape in ways that empowered children to see themselves as able to have a role in caring for their environment.

Notes

1. Although this article refers to some retellings of Australian Indigenous narratives (those from Katie Langloh-Parker's collection that were presented as a kind of fairy tale), this article, with respect, seeks to consider white Australian fairy tales as a separate literature from that of the Australian Indigenous storytelling traditions.
2. Not all of the tales have an overt environmental conservation theme and may simply reference such themes. See *Australian fairy tales* (1926) by Ethel English; *The further adventures of Bib and Bub* (1927) by May Gibbs; *The Australian fairy tale of the three koala bears* (1930) by Cinesound Productions; 'Serana the bush fairy' in *Fairyland of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite* (1931) by Grenbry Outhwaite; *Nuttybub and Nittersing* (1932) by May Gibbs; *Pearl Pinkie and Sea Greenie* (1935) by Pixie O'Harris; *The complete adventures of Blinky Bill* (1939) by Dorothy Wall; *John Mystery's again…Pearl and Plain: The Woolly sisters Blue Sunshine* (1943) by John Mystery; *Wim-wam tales* (1945) by Elsie Over; *The complete adventures of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (1947) by May Gibbs.

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