

**Towards Active Citizens: Landscape, nationalism and politics  
in 20<sup>th</sup> century British and Australian children's literature.**

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**Research Focus, November 2008  
University of Worcester, UK.**

**November 2008**

**Abstract**

This paper compares and contrasts different approaches to the landscape as heritage as expressed by selected writers for children. This paper contrasts some English attitudes and values in writers in the 20th century, selected for their particular concern for landscape issues and certainly not homogenous. This is contrasted with the political sensitivities brought about by colonialism in Australia, in particular about portrayal of Aborigines and use of their stories in publications for children, stories which focus on their intimate relationship with their heritage landscape. Stories encourage children to be environmental activists and hold the promise of inclusion and social equity.

Attitudes to the land, who owns it, and how it should be looked after provides a significant theme in children's literature. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by land disputes, as country estates began to be sold off after 1918, the right to roam was affirmed by ramblers, the Nazi authorities grabbed land, and colonies began to wrestle with indigenous land rights.

Children in Britain were encouraged to 'play' outdoors, with movements such as the scouts, guides, and the 'cooperative' woodcraft folk structuring their experience with expeditions, badges and jamborees. In the 1930s these met their German counterparts at European jamborees who had a dark message of national socialism and living space for the true blooded. The theme of contested space was thrust at them, sharpened by war, invasion threats and post-war reconstruction. Children's stories reflect this situation in a range of ways. In Australia, the contested land focused around aboriginal rights. It had become clear that the white colonisers had acquired land with very dubious ethics and probity, regarding aboriginal life and well-being as of little account. Changing social attitudes led to the gradual return of some sacred sites. The portrayal of the aboriginal also changed, and ethical concerns over the use of their stories had a fascinating history.

Landscape may suggest a framed picture, a view, a picturesque experience by a passive observer. Yet to an active participant within it, it is a dynamic process, an annual rhythm, a place of work, leisure and adventure. The book acts as a frame, the reader is a passive observer of the fictional action: we argue however that the writer encourages children to step into the frame, to enter the story emotionally, and with empathy. They cease then to be passive outsiders and imaginatively join the story characters as activists and problem solvers. Within the general philosophical study of human experience of life (phenomenology) Edmund Husserl's 'generative phenomenology' focuses on *the genesis of meaning* – the beginnings of an understanding which with structure future experiences. We see the children's story helps to make the landscape, environment and countryside meaningful, and begin a process of thought and reflection that will enable them to make their own values explicit. Heritage we see as more than ownership. It is a sense of responsibility to cherish, maintain and be custodians of the land which is passed on, a sense of active citizenship. This is not necessarily a Romantic maintaining of picturesqueness and status quo, but a call for sensitive decision making. The stories we survey are as interested in land use, farming and even industry and urban life.

## A. Children's Literature in Britain (Stephen Bigger)

This is of necessity a limited survey of children's writers from the 1930s onwards for whom the landscape and countryside held a particular fascination. An underlying conceptual process asks how writers have encouraged readers to value their environment. We draw on interpretative hermeneutics to apply insights within an historic text to contemporary issues, particularly the complex analysis of Paul Ricoeur on narrative and its relationship with phenomenological experience. This invites us to dig beneath the plot (which in children's stories vary from excellent to banal) to examine issues philosophically, a process which the child reader can also engage with. Ricoeur's dialogic hermeneutics both suggests a dialogue between author and reader, which through multi-voice 'polyphony' can equalise power imbalance. My approach has been to explore children's books as social history, involving authorly issues, publishers' agendas and reader interest. In this paper, these come together concerning landscape, countryside and environment to produce in general a philosophy of appreciation, contribution and custodianship. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1975) spoke of culture as a network of values and attitudes, held often with some tension within a community. The author in our case expresses both personal beliefs combined with an assessment of what his audience wish to hear so that the book is a commercial success.

The landscape can be treated imaginatively. A.A. Milne had set his Pooh adventures in nearby Ashdown Forest, Sussex which becomes an imaginative space, involving even an to 'the north pole'. The picture is of 'Gallion's Leap' with its memorial to Milne and Sheperd. The text says that they 'captured the magic of Ashdown Forest'.



For very young children, a sense of magic builds a positive foundation. For older children, responsibility for the environment is summed up by Malcolm Saville, writing during the war:

"The spirit of this book is England – not the England of slag-heaps, slovenly ribbon building and forgotten towns – but the England of little dimpled hills and winding lanes; of village greens with rooks cawing in the elms; of bluebell

woods, of pale primrose-spangled copses and of weathered churches and friendly farmsteads. Is our children's heritage and needs to be guarded with love and vigilance today." (Saville, 1944, cover blurb)

This is unashamedly Romantic, preferring the picturesque to the industrial, but it has a conservationist and political edge (my italics):

"It may seem strange to tell you at the beginning of a book about the country and wildlife that *England is yours and that when you are grown-up you will have to look after her*. But this is so, because England is one of those countries where the *people who live in it have a share in its planning and government*.

I am sure you know too, that there is no country in the world for which so many sacrifices have been made and which holds so many treasures. It is probably difficult for you to remember that before the war it was possible to have holidays at the seaside or on a farm and draw the curtains wide at night because there was no blackout. And because of the war you may never have had a chance to see our own countryside, which is the loveliest and rarest of Britain's treasures.

... *All these places are your heritage. They are the Britain for which so many of her sons have fought and died*. One day the countryside will pass into your keeping *to guard and cherish in your turn*, and it is important to remember that it is very easily spoiled" (pp.5f)

We wince at the anglocentric chauvinism of a writer in south-east England (he even calls a Welsh poet English), but his messages of local democracy, community spirit and environmental responsibility chime well with today's agendas. His children's stories are replete with holidays on farms, at the seaside, in Shropshire especially but later in Sussex, on Dartmoor, and in various small towns and villages. Some of his child characters came out of London and missed fish and chips and the cinema; but as Saville says,

"Do not think that the country is dull because there is not a cinema at the corner of every winding lane. There is more to do in the country than in the town; more to see, and more to learn and remember" (p.6).



In his stories, children defeat adults who are up to no good and become active citizens. The ownership of England is *by the people*. The photograph is of the Long Mind in Shropshire, the backdrop of his Lone Pine series. He calls the reservoir pictured Hatcholt, and its fate is the subject of the first story. His

characters find huge enjoyment from experiencing the wild places, quite apart from the formal plot. His *Jane's Country Year* (1945) has no plot except what Jane did month by month when recuperating from illness on a farm. The descriptions of spring blossom, birds and their nests, and the farming year are brilliant. Kitty Barne's brilliant description of evacuee families (*Visitors from London, 1940*), *Carnegie Medal winner*, ends with an East End tearaway settling to and loving the job of shepherd. Malcolm Saville's 'Lone Piner' Tom, a farmhand, was also an evacuee from London.

Children have to manage the adults around them. They have to distinguish between friend and foe, not always easy – and sometimes foes can become friends. Young people's contribution to farming and 'grow your own' (digging for victory) is best depicted by Kathleen Fidler's *The Borrowed Garden*, the first Brydon story (1944)



where a family from the city cultivate a small plot in a landowner's estate (one character, Roger, has a passion for growing things). There is a row, which results in the landowner capitulating and becoming redeemed –

thereafter a loyal supporter. Josephine Elder's Annis attended a Farm School, not "hide-bound by timetables". Written at the outbreak of war, *Strangers at the Farm School* describes Jewish refugee pupils and gives a sensitive account of political circumstances under Nazi rule. Girls in Elinor Brent Dyer' Chalet School witnessed a Jewish shopkeeper being murdered and fled the Tyrol mountains to Switzerland (*Chalet School in Exile, 1940*). The series philosophy was world peace (the Peace

League) without capitulation to Nazi thuggery. Gardening was firmly on the Chalet School curriculum during the war as it moved first to the Channel Islands and finally to Hereford. Older girls were able to become land girls helping on farms. Toby (Dorita Fairlie Bruce), whose earlier school adventures had been popular, worked on Tibbs Cross Farm and foiled a dastardly shifty-looking Nazi spy (1942). The characterisation is nevertheless interesting, and the farming detail gives an insight into war conditions. Doris Pocock's *Lorna on the Land* describes farm life. Barbara Wilcox's *Susan on Hallet's Farm* adds a sense of mystery which is only resolved on the last pages, perhaps with romantic interest.

Stories have been set on farms to illustrate where food comes from, and how children should behave responsibly, shutting gates and preventing fires. Enid Blyton worked with *Country Life* to produce *The Children of Cherry Tree Farm* (1941) and its sequels about Willow Farm, at a time when children were evacuated to farms from London. Malcolm Saville secured the book and film *Trouble at Townend*, based on his own farmhouse in Hertfordshire (he was not a farmer), which was made into a film by



“Britain’s Shirley Temple”, 13 year old Petula Clark (1945). In this tale, evacuee children learn the hard way about gates and fires. David Severn started his own career with a fiery farm story, *Rick Afire*, (1942). The photographs are by Gee Denes, from *John and Jennifer at the Farm*, with text by Malcolm Saville under a pseudonym.

Carol Forest emphasised the idea of contribution and everyday adventure through the Girl Guides (*Patteran Patrol*). An outdoor adventure is featured in *Two Rebels and a Pilgrim* (the Pilgrim Way), where the core idea is custodianship. *A House for Simon* follows a group of refugee children across England, their adults having disappeared: they find a derelict house which they restore as their own. *Caravan School* features a group of children returned from evacuation in America to find formal school pointless and boring, their independent spirits struggling not to be tamed. A journey in a caravan with an aunt taught them informally, leading them to an arts and crafts school where they eventually became students. Carol Forest’s vision was that education should be practical, with pupils creating things mentored by

skilled craftsmen – not stuck in classrooms learning ‘stuff’. This emphasises that the arts and crafts heritage is threatened by mass production of artefacts that will not last. In one powerful passage, Jocelyn dreams of Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>, looking down the centuries at key Englishmen (sic!) and saying to the young teenager, “And what will your contribution be?”.

Even twenty years earlier, before rambler protests, England was owned by the landowners, who policed it with gamekeepers. This contrast is made by David Severn, heir to the Unwin empire, whose *Ponies and Poachers*, (1948) show a more privileged and exclusive view of the country estate. His earlier series, his best, depict ‘Crusoe’ Robinson, an accountant escaping to the wild country for spiritual sustenance, coming together with children evacuated to a nearby farm and having country experiences focusing on a rick fire, in a Romany caravan and with the Romanies, in a forest, and finally in the Welsh hills with a hermit painter.

In the same period, Arthur Ransome used the Lake District and the Norfolk broads as an aquatic landscape, first as a source of imagination and fun (*Swallows and Amazons*) but later with environmental realism as the child characters protect wild habitat against townie boaters on the Broads (Coot Club) and protecting Great Northern Divers against a bird and egg collector (Great Northern).

Geoffrey Trease set the Black Banner stories near Barrow in Furness: a socialist, one story (*Under Black Banner*) described a battle with the war office to get requisitioned and wasted land back to its rightful owner, the farming family. There are ownership disputes in these books too, as walkers are excluded by officious landowners (e.g. *No Boats to Bannermere*, 1947).

BB (Denys Watkins Pitchford) wrote naturalist stories from 1937 with an unashamed hunting and shooting theme. Carnegie medalist *Little Grey Men* (1942) featured gnomes in a wood; *Brendan Chase* (1944) described boys living wild all summer, having run away from home (parents didn’t seem at all concerned...). This presented a ‘survival’ message of wilderness, living off the land, a stark contrast to Saville romantic depiction of the landscape as wild beauty, but with a home to go back to. Featuring realistic animals struggling to survive in their habitat (unlike ratty, mole and toad). Richard Church’s *A Squirrel Called Rufus* (1941) is the first I have discovered, about red and grey squirrels (paralleling Nazi aggression). More famous was Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972) about rabbits, and Robert Horwood’s *Duncton Wood* double trilogy (1980 onwards) about moles. Colin Dann’s *The Animals of Farthing*

Wood (1979 onwards) depicts human destructiveness of habitat from an animal point of view. These attempted stories of animal life struggling for survival in the face of human development.

The books I have discussed generally encourage children to be contributors and custodians of landscape and wildlife. The English landscape is presented as requiring environmental vigilance, a heritage to be treasured and owned by the people democratically. In landscape use, the needs of people and animals are considered. That the landscape is for romantic beauty is contested; the rights of the people who have always lived there, the farmers and village folk, even Romanies, were considered important and visitors from towns needed to learn how to behave. There is a strong emphasis on active citizenship, or put more strongly, the young citizen as activist, to challenge wrong and to champion right. This is nowhere better articulated than in M.E. Atkinson's series on the Locket family, depicted her child characters as enterprising, responsible, observant and exhibiting strong positive relationships and explicitly deeply criticising argumentativeness, disagreeableness, name-calling, and lack of initiative (e.g. *Challenge to Adventure*, 1942).

These naturalistic adventures are not the flavour of today's writing for children with its repetitive emphasis on fantasy worlds and magic. C S Lewis started this innocently in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* in which children escaping from the blitz enter a fantasy world, full of war and struggle (against the White Witch) and teaches that tyranny is only defeated by determination and struggle, and the deep magic generated when an innocent person sacrifices his or her life. It is deeply rooted in the trauma of war. Alan Garner quarried Cheshire folklore in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960), and Welsh in the *Owl Service* (1967). Robin Jarvis in *The I Whitby Witches* (1991) gives a horror treatment, with powers of the deep, mysterious monsters, warlocks and invisible little people. Such magic 'unrealism' of witches, monsters and trolls makes little contribution to reflection on the real world, although some promote the idea of the citizen activist.



## **B. Australia: Aboriginal Tales** (Robyn Cox)

The emergence of a distinct children's literature for Australia is complex and maps a path which is characterised by both heritage and landscape – however this becomes influenced by both links to English heritage and landscape and the more overriding colonialism and links with the 'mother country'. Where this path begins to meander and become interestingly rutted is with impact of Australia's relationship with its indigenous people and the on-going waves of migration into Australia. The discussion that I would like to take forward from here is about children's literature which emerged from the colonial Australia and their relationship with the original population. I have worked from Organ's (1994) *Bibliography of Australian Aboriginal Dreaming Stories from 1789 to 1991*.

The initial emergence of stories from the Australian Aboriginal population I have titled as the **Accounts of Life** period which runs for a 100 year period from 1788 to 1880. This stage is characterised by scholarly work including that written by Colonial leaders in the country - an example is Captain Tench's (1789): *A Narrative of an Expedition to Botany Bay, & A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, London, 2 volumes. This documents some aspects of early accounts of Aboriginal culture and stories. Other scholarly work of this time was written by missionaries and published in learned journals in Europe; an example of this is 'Legends of the Australian Aborigines' written by F. C. 'Urquhart, in (1884) and published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, volume 14, no 1, p87.

The next period is richer and runs from 1880 to 1930 it is characterised by the on-going scholarly work even with some writing by some famous anthropological figures of the period like Radcliffe- Brown. I have titled this the **Anthropological period** and this period is clearly exemplified by Radcliffe-Brown's (1926)



The Rainbow-Serpent Myth of Australia published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, London, volume 56. During this period two very interesting other aspects emerged – that of the woman as collector of stories. The colonial woman building a home for herself and her family in the far flung colony felt moved to collect stories for children from the indigenous culture. The perfect exemplar of this is Mrs K Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales - Folklore of the Noonaburrahs as told*

to the *Piccaninnies*, which was published in both London & Melbourne, in 1896. This is a clear attempt by Mrs Parker to collect stories for children as the primary audience and the first moment that this bibliography suggests a form of Children's Literature from the Australian Aboriginal people's stories. Ethnographic reports were also elements of the work at this time however the scholars did not acknowledge that the culture that they were describing was from an outsider's viewpoint – an ETIC account. There were also local newspapers publishing local Aboriginal tales at this time – often linked to the land an example is 'Blue Mountains Legends' (1910) in the *Blue Mountains Echo newspaper* which recounted the Aboriginal myth associated with The Three Sisters.

The next period is short (1930 to 1960) and is very interesting in terms of the mapping of the Australian national landscape and emergence and legitimisation of Aboriginal stories for children and for the wider Australian population. I have titled this period **The Wars** as Australia's participation in two World Wars in Europe due to the colonial ties to the 'mother country' began a process of the emergence of nationalism. Some examples of publications from this period which helped define what it means to be Australian – Fenner, C., (1933) *Bunyips and Billabongs: An Australian Out of Doors*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

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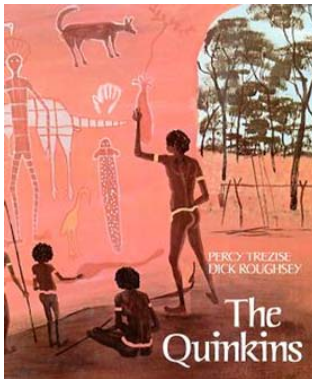
A much more interesting phenomenon emerged from this period when we look at Aboriginal tales for children. It became justifiable to embrace Aboriginal culture as this was part of the 'true Aussie culture'. As we came out of the period of the wars a proliferation of children's stories emerged: Alsop, J (1952) *Nunee: An Aboriginal Folk Story*. Sydney: Angus and

Robertson; Dane, L.A. (1948) *The Legend of the coming of the first kangaroo*. Melbourne: Truesdell Press.

In embracing this body of literature comes the first acknowledgement of the ownership of the stories and authors (still colonial whites) were beginning to locate the tales into their landscape, for example: Norledge, M (1958) *The Woman and the Sacred Bora ground: An Aboriginal Legend from Bentley near Kyogle, New South Wales*. *Dawn*, Vol 7; and Robinson, R. (1957) *Aboriginal Tales from Wallaga Lake Mission: Told by Percey Mumbulla and other*. *The Bulletin* v77, n32.

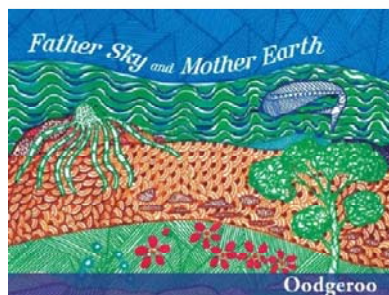
This takes us to the final period in my analysis from 1960 onwards - **Aboriginal Land Rights**. Early in this period we see the emergence of distinct stories for children – a good example of this is the story told and retold under many guises as The Frog; Tiddalick, The Frog; Kwork: Kwork the green frog and other tales from the spirit time. The most famous Aboriginal stories for children emerged from the partnership between Dick Roughsey and Percy Trezise over a 10 year period.

**Books written between 1978 and 1987 by  
Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey**



1. The Rainbow Serpent
2. The Quinkins
3. Banana bird and the snake men
4. Turramulli the Giant Quinkin
5. The Magic Firesticks
6. Gidja
7. Ngalculli - The Red Kangaroo
8. The Flying Fox Warriors
9. The Owl People

This partnership was with a non-aboriginal Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey. These stories emerged as an Aboriginal Children’s literature canon in the period leading up to the Mabo Decision. This was used commonly in schools and most young liberal families collected these children’s books for their children. However, as Land Rights became an issue and the Aboriginal people become politicised behind their quest for ownership of their lands; their art and their cultural property it quickly became clear that these stories were not ‘a canon’ but another example of how the dominant group had taken up these stories; in a similar way as they had taken land; taken the children away; and, collected Aboriginal carvings, art and artefacts. Aboriginal children’s stories quickly became caught up in this socio-political milieu.



Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1981),  
Father Sky and Mother Earth.  
Melbourne: John Wiley & Sons.

When, on 3 June, 1992, the High Court of Australia delivered its landmark Mabo decision which rewrote the Australian common law and established native title which is a recognition in the law of Australia of the continued ownership of land by local Indigenous Australians. Put simply, the decision said that under Australian law, Indigenous people have rights to land - rights that existed before colonisation and which still exist.

Up to this period the place and ownership of Aboriginal children's stories were seen as part of the broader history of Australia which is a story of how settlers made productive use of an empty land, thus saving Aboriginal peoples from destitution.



Modern Aboriginal history is based on different rememberings where people 'reclaim' the past as well as 'claim' the present, and while doing this bring a set of memories which specify ownership – and opportunity for a future.

### **Conclusion.**

Understanding the socio-cultural context of children's literature adds levels of meaning and deepens both understanding and appreciation. Books not high on literary merit may still add considerably to our comprehension of their world. In this paper we have focused on landscape and countryside (in a broad sense) where conflict over space and land is a significant issue. In both examples, national identity is a significant factor in the conflict. We have discussed a citizenship theme where positive relationships contribute to a sense of community, and where children are encouraged to contribute to the task of improving the world. Stories encourage them to be environmental activists. This hold the promise of inclusion, or social equity. In the Australian example, the question the ownership of stories is central. Traditional stories are not to be stolen, reshaped, and published for profit – particularly by an invading culture which holds supreme political and social power. The stories are sacred, the heritage and birthright of aboriginal people, a form of scripture. This, and the positive image of aboriginal people depicted in children stories, establishes this literature as empowering and inclusive, a contribution to social equity and citizenship.

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