‘A little child shall lead them’: Tasmanian and Victorian School Readers and National Growth

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Reading, one of the ‘three Rs’ still fundamental to educational theory and reconceptualisations of literacy teaching and learning, is a complex socio-cultural practice. Recent attacks on critical literacy approaches to teaching English reveal that what children are taught to read, and how they are taught to read it, is value-laden and contentious (Slattery 2005, p.31). Critics argue for a ‘back to basics’ approach to teaching a love of reading, a reaction to the ‘postmodern literary theory [that] has infiltrated our schools at the expense of comprehension and expression’ (Ibid). Yet these same critics appear unaware that the link between children’s literature and ideology was both recognised by, and institutionalised in, Australian school textbooks of nearly 80 years ago. Indeed, in the 1928 preface to the eighth book, the first of the *Victorian Readers* to be published, the editorial committee was explicit in its intended literary production of young Australians.

> *The young readers were to begin at home, to be taken in imagination to various parts of the Empire, to Europe, and to the United States of America, and thus gain a knowledge of their rich heritage and acquire a well-founded pride of race. The inculcation of sound morality was always to be kept in view, and support given to the creation of a feeling against international strife and to the implanting of a desire for world-wide toleration.*
> (1928, pp.v-vi)

This essay is framed by the quotation that appears on the first edition title pages of both the First and Second Books of the *Victorian Readers* published in 1928 and 1930 respectively: ‘A little child shall lead them’. This child of the Readers, I argue, is the central element around which ideals of Australian nation and nationhood are constructed. In both the Tasmanian and Victorian reading books, encoded themes of national growth negotiate between innocence and knowingness, informed by the figure of the child, selective memories and collective imagining. In one of Australia’s best-known children’s books, Ethel Turner’s *Seven Little Australians*, the significance of a symbolic association between the idealised child and reinvented national beginnings is overt: ‘It may be that the land and the people are young-hearted together, and the children’s spirits not crushed and saddened by the shadow of long years’ sorrowful history. There is a lurking sparkle of joyousness and rebellion and mischief in nature here, and therefore in children’ (1994, p.2). In an evolving discourse of children and childhood taken up by the school Readers, children are ‘the spirited, single-hearted, loyal ones who alone can “advance Australia”’ (Ibid).

The age of innocence: the lost child

The figure of the innocent child has a particular resonance for Australia as nation, a nation clinging to notions of its own innocence at the time the Readers were published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially in relation to Aboriginal displacement and genocide, the economic, social and political fallout of the First World War, and perhaps most powerfully, the legacy of a nineteenth century ‘innocence’ in regards to the Australian natural environment. In lost children narratives the Australian environment is not merely the ‘mischievous’ entity as envisioned by Turner. A dark and pervasive fear about the fragility of innocence underpins texts of lost children, especially children lost in the bush.

Peter Pierce’s influential study *The Country of Lost Children* (1999) provides extensive analysis of two of the nineteenth-century texts reproduced in the Readers (‘Lost in the Bush’ and Marcus Clarke’s ‘Pretty Dick’) as well as broader analysis of these mythographic stories as they relate to an Australian cultural heritage. Pierce reads narratives of lost children as ‘metaphorical, for the figure of the lost child becomes a vital means for European Australians in the latter half of the nineteenth century to express and understand the insecurities of their position in a land that was new to many of them, and strange to all’ (Pierce 1999, p.xiii). While the lost child’s symbolic status as identified by Pierce is clearly relevant, the significance of these narratives in the context of the Readers extends beyond the anxieties of a European settler society. As Pierce acknowledges, ‘this figure would also afford an opportunity to develop the discourse of “young Australia”, that is, to speculate on the nature of the coming race in this country, and the future of the nation soon to be’ (p.8). Published more or less 30 years after Federation, the Readers are concerned with the literary production of children and childhood as analogous with the production

of an *innocent* Australia. Therefore, it is innocence (and the protection or destruction of this innocence) that in both literal and metaphorical senses forms the central concern of lost children narratives in the Readers.

In these narratives, childhood is represented as a naturally innocent state. The emergence of this idea of childhood, the notion that children should exist in a separate social domain to be mothered and treasured, is a product of the modern era (Aries 1965, p.29). In *The Age of Innocence*, Anne Higgonet names this image the 'Romantic child' (1998, p.16). Significantly for analysis of the Readers, Higgonet argues that the Romantic child denies or allows us to forget many aspects of adult society (p.23): 'The modern child is always the sign of a bygone era, of a past which is necessarily the past of adults, yet which, being so distinct, so sheltered, so innocent, is also inevitably a lost past, and therefore understood through the kind of memory we call nostalgia' (p.27). Written, produced and mediated by adults, the Readers can be read in relation to such nostalgia in their selective recording and reordering of a past necessary to envisioning an unblemished childhood and a certain kind of illustrious future.

Roni Natov's *The Poetics of Childhood* (2003) and Peter Coveney's *The Image of Childhood* (1963) adduce similar arguments about the rise of the Romantic child, as promulgated in a literary context by Rousseau, Blake and Wordsworth. Higgonet's notion of nostalgia, the significance of childhood in relation to the rediscovery of a lost past (lost in both the individual past and in the past of the culture), is taken up by Natov in citing Carolyn Steedman's *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930* (1995). Following Steedman's work, Natov suggests that reclaiming a childhood past 'suggests a larger historical retrieval as well, so that the idea of childhood and the modern idea of history emerged together' (2003, p.4). This is particularly apparent in relation to the representation of the past in narratives literally concerned with loss, lost children and lost innocence. Coveney agrees: 'In childhood lay the perfect image of insecurity and isolation, of fear and bewilderment, of vulnerability and potential violation' (1963, pp.1-2).

The title of Marcus Clarke's short story 'Pretty Dick' (published in *The Tasmanian Readers* Grade V) is suggestive of a romanticised childhood innocence. The artistic precursors to this idyllic version of childhood (most notably Sir Joshua Reynold's *The Age of Innocence,* reproduced as the frontispiece of the Second Book of the *Victorian Readers,* offer images of pretty, luminescent children – the paleness of soft skin highlighted by rosy cheeks. In keeping with such depictions of childhood, Pretty Dick is described as 'a slender little lad, with eyes like pools of still water when the sky is violet at sunset, and a skin as white as milk' (1933*,* p.1). Yet there exists a clear differentiation between Pretty Dick and his European forebears: his skin 'where it had been touched by the sun … was a golden brown' (p.1). Furthering this notion of an Australian identity (revealed by a preoccupation with rural masculinity), Pretty Dick is 'manly too' (p.1), in a way which is at odds with his childlike appearance. Yet his innocence is maintained, because Pretty Dick is clearly still a child, with child-like desires and pleasures. Paddling and playing at the creek, he sings 'scraps of his mother's songs', and slips 'merrily between friendly trunks and branches' (p.2). The creek itself is personified as encapsulating a mood of childish abandonment. 'Here his friend, the creek, divided itself into all sorts of queer shapes, and ran here, and doubled back again … just out of pure fun and frolic' (p.2).

Significantly, Pretty Dick's innocent pleasures are tainted as he moves toward the creek's crossing place: 'Now the way began to go up-hill, and there were big, dead trees to get over, and fallen, spreading branches to go round' (p.4). The crossing place is symbolic of Pretty Dick's own passage across the fragile boundary of childhood, a transition which threatens his innocence as he steps into the foreign and seductive bush: 'There was a subtle perfume about him now; not a sweet rich perfume like the flowers in the home-station garden, but a strange, intoxicating smell' (p.4). The natural environment becomes an increasingly foreboding presence as he continues upwards in a transgression against nature (both in terms of the bush itself and in terms of the 'natural' boundaries of a child's development). Unlike the friendly creek, the scrub is hostile, it scratches and tears at him 'as though it would hold him back' (p.4).

When Pretty Dick begins to fear that he is lost, it is his mother's voice he hears. This association between the child and the mother (securing Pretty Dick's continued status as child/innocent) is juxtaposed against Pretty Dick's appropriation of man-like characteristics: 'But he put the feeling away bravely, swallowed down a lump in his throat, and went on again' (p.5). Pretty Dick's imitation of manliness, however, merely underscores his childish desire to cry. The last semblances of his innocence are shattered when his coo-ees to a distant overseer do not bring rescue. The mocking cry of 'a hideous black crow', the only 'living thing' around him, signals his aloneness, as well as his eventual fate. Childhood is irretrievably lost: 'No more mother's kisses, no more father's caresses, no more pleasures, no more flowers, no more sunshine – nothing but grim death waiting remorselessly in the iron solitude of the hills' (p.7). Lost innocence, it appears, is tantamount to death itself.

'Lost in the Bush', published in the Fourth Book of the *Victorian Readers*, is central (in its construction as a true story) to the Australian narrative tradition of lost children. The three child characters are introduced with careful emphasis on their ages: 'Isaac, nine years old; Jane, seven and a half; and Frank, a toddler, not four', as the childhood innocence of the protagonists drive both story elements and narrative significance. As the text's focalising child figures, Isaac, Jane and Frank invite reader identification. They embody that which is valued in the Readers' discourse of children and childhood, and by implication, the nation: a naturalised and cherished state of goodness and naiveté.

Like Pretty Dick, the Duff children are initially represented as happy and carefree in the bush. They have a 'fine time', Isaac climbing trees, Jane picking flowers as well as chasing lizards for Frank (1930, pp.60-1). The bush is inviting and hospitable. After lunch there is 'quite a feast of gum from a clump of wattle-trees' (p.61). Yet as they turn toward what they think is the way home, the children become lost. It is important then, to note that the Duff children do not cross any actual or symbolic threshold in their wanderings. It is this notable absence of a transgressed boundary that ensures their eventual restoration to the family group.

When the sun sets and the bush grows 'gloomy and still' the children huddle together at the foot of a tree to say the prayers they have been taught by their mother. Pretty Dick also prays, but his prayers to God are suggestive of a hopeless sense of abandonment rather than the romanticised portrayal in the Duff retelling. Frank cries himself to sleep, Jane as surrogate mother makes him a pillow from broom, and the narrator interjects to emphasise the desperate plight facing the children: 'Poor, dear little things!' (p.63). Here the ideological production of children by or through text becomes more explicit as the reader is afforded deeper psychological insights into Jane's behaviour. Awake, she lies 'listening to the cry of the curlew', courageous and vigilant against the unknown dangers of the night (p.63). Such vigilance ensures that when she is finally found, her moral fortitude (and therefore her innocence and chastity) has triumphed. Her protectiveness and selflessness, taking 'off her frock to wrap round her little brother', is represented as reflective of a social reality where women nurture and (particularly in terms of Christian rhetoric), where the strong protect the weak (p.63). Indeed, the final sentence, temporally removed from the story's events, reveals the narrator's preoccupation with highlighting the narrative's significance. 'Jane's motherly attention to her little brother has won for her a place among the world's noble girls' (p.69).

The significance attributed to the figure of Jane as female and surrogate mother is her symbolic purpose as the reproductive site that will ensure the nation's continued innocence and therefore, its future. As Pierce has suggested, there is a sexual undercurrent to the Jane Duff story (1999, p.27). Providing an interesting comparison with 'Lost in the Bush', themes of sexual anxiety and a corrupted Australian innocence are more explicit in Barbara Baynton's 'The Chosen Vessel'. Jane's potential, unspoken fate is realised in Baynton's short story in which a woman alone in the bush is raped and murdered by a swagman. Thematic undercurrents are revealed in the stories' parallels. Particularly significant is the warning inherent in 'The Chosen Vessel'. In 'Lost in the Bush' Jane Duff lies awake listening to the cries of a curlew as she maintains her watch against the night. In 'The Chosen Vessel' the cries of the curlews provide the connection between sexuality and sacredness as they

pick up the besieged woman's final cry of 'murder' after she has been mistaken for a holy vision by a passerby and potential rescuer.[1]

Both 'Lost in the Bush' and 'The Chosen Vessel' are constructed at this intersection of nationhood and sacredness, by which I mean both the religious themes of the stories, and the identification of sacred themes or symbols of national growth. Jane Duff is an innocent, saintly heroine framed by a parable-like narrative.[2] In contrast, the overt association between the bush mother and the Virgin Mother in 'The Chosen Vessel', when read in concert with her fate at a bushman's hands, provides a counter discourse to sacred myths of Australianness. The bush itself and the masculine embodiment of Australian identity cannot be read as innocent because they are revealed as complicit in the woman's murder.

Brave boys and girls

To produce a more stereotypical model of national development, narratives of brave boys work across the Readers to inscribe the figure of the male child, the bushman's descendant, as leader of the future. One such text, 'An Adventure with the Blacks', published in the Fifth Book of the *Victorian Readers*, is focalised through a central child protagonist, the narrator's younger self. The man as narrator, however, knowingly imbues this account of the past with the mythical qualities of Australian masculine identity: 'I was only nine years old at the time, but had been brought up to fear nothing' (1930, p.2).

As Margot Hillel argues, discourses of heroism often intersect with discourses of race (2003, p.74). Indeed, the brave boy of 'Adventures with the Blacks' is defined entirely by his courage in facing Aboriginal 'savages' amid a scene of absolute 'wildness' that further underscores a construction of the Aboriginal person as wild, uncivilised (1930, p. 3). 'Bloodthirsty yells from hundreds of voices' alert the child and his father to danger as they travel home through the bush (p.3). Despite referring to himself in the third person as a 'boy', the narrator establishes his claim to a more manly, heroic status when he advises his father on the best course of action to take: 'I implored my father not to shoot, as I knew only too well that, had he done so, they would have speared us to death' (p.4). Clearly a leader in the making, the boy makes the correct judgement: after his father puts down his gun, 'the blacks, who were in the act of throwing their spears, at once put them down and walked up to us' (p.4).

The accompanying Reader notes to 'An Adventure with the Blacks' direct a particular ideological reception of the narrative where the nation can be read as 'innocent' in relation to the bloodshed of its Aboriginal peoples. Students are asked to consider the question 'Were the blacks fairly treated by early settlers in general?' (p.194). While 'self confessed traditionalist' Christopher Bantick 'laments the politicisation of English teaching by the theorists', the presence of this kind of questioning in the Readers demonstrates the already politicised nature of English teaching (see Slattery, p. 31). Given that the normative work of this text effectively silences and excludes the nation's indigenous peoples (where they are represented as primitive, bloodthirsty thieves and murderers), it is clear that a particular answer to the question is privileged.

In an important distinction drawn along the lines of gender, discourses of race are not so central to the Readers' constructions of brave girls. Rather, the courageous deeds of heroines are intrinsically linked to the responsibilities of hearth and home. 'A brave Australian girl', published in both the Tasmanian and Victorian Readers, highlights the containment of the sacrificial Australian heroine. Courting life-threatening danger, Grace, the brave girl of the story's title, rides her horse into a 'rough' and 'angry' sea to rescue every person on board a sinking ship (*Tasmanian Reader Grade IV,* 1933, p. 6). Even while Grace is 'written into' a narrative more fitting of a boys' own adventure (after all, she is out bush searching for stray cattle when she sees the ship in distress), it is her feminine, motherly duty that is foregrounded: 'The people whom she had saved from death were much in need of food, and ought to be provided with shelter before night came on. So Grace, without giving herself time for rest, rode home for help' (p. 7).

The inevitable fate of female heroines in early Australian children's literature is taken up by Sharyn Pearce in 'Literature, Mythmaking and National Identity: The Case for *Seven Little Australians*' (1997). In exploring the links between myths of national identity and children's literature

(specifically Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* and the demise of Judy), Pearce demonstrates that while Australian children's writing allowed girls considerably more freedom than the colonial novels they eventually replaced, girls were 'still confined to the verandahs' (p.15). Just as Judy's death neatly removes her from the male domain of the bush, Grace is ultimately returned to the responsibilities of home and hearth in 'A brave Australian girl'.

Similarly, 'A Rescue' (Fifth book, *Victorian Readers*) produces a strong and resourceful heroine only to reduce her to a symbolic sacrifice at the close of the narrative. Written by one of Turner's contemporaries in Australian children's writing, 'A Rescue' is drawn from Mary Grant Bruce's *Possum*. Possum, the story's heroine, takes decisive action when the small child Garth is carried away on a swift current in an old dinghy. Like most brave Australian children in the Readers, Possum's physicality is pronounced: 'Her arms never ceased their rapid, mechanical strokes – under the thin blouse her muscles rose and fell as she opened her shoulders with long, powerful swings' (1933, p.79). In contrast, Garth's mother Aileen can be likened to the stereotypically ineffective English 'lady', introduced in Australian literature to demonstrate the superiority of colonial girls and women in contrast to their European counterparts. Aileen cannot row 'decently' nor can she remain calm in the crisis. Significantly, it is the younger and socially inferior Possum (Possum addresses Aileen as 'Missus'), who takes charge of Aileen, sternly directing her to 'sit down!' (p.81).

The sinking of Garth's boat, the climax of the narrative, requires a swift and courageous response from the heroine. Screaming at Garth to jump, Possum dives after him. When Aileen's husband and Possum's father providentially arrive, 'Possum was paddling feebly with one hand, almost done' (p.83). Yet Possum has the strength for a final sacrifice when she meets her father's eyes. '"Take Garth", she gasped' (p.83). Just as Jane Duff takes off her dress for her brother's protection (or more dramatically, just as Grace Bussell risks her own life to save others), the ideological construction of an Australian heroine's selflessness lends a supportive framework to this scene. In a representation of the ultimate female responsibility to the nation – her reproductive duty, when Possum chooses to accept her own death before Garth's, she effectively gives him life.

There are no shipwrecks or near drownings in an excerpt from Ethel Turner's *The Family at Misrule* (published in both Tasmanian and Victorian Readers). Yet the same discursive production of brave girls operates in its construction of the female as she is defined by a national growth dependent on the social structure of home and hearth. This excerpt, published as 'Poppet's visit to the school', in *The Tasmanian Readers Grade IV* is titled 'The Champion' in the Fifth Book of the *Victorian Readers*.

The narrative introduces its heroine as 'a little, slight girl… with a white, small face, great frightened eyes shining strangely, and soft lips very tightly closed' (*Tasmanian Readers* 1933, p.101). Notably, there is great emphasis placed on Poppet's diminutive size (the adjective 'little' appears six times in this opening description of her) as her physical adherence to the ideal image of the Romantic child underscores her bravery in facing the dread headmaster to plead her brother's innocence. Clearly, it is Poppet's trust in her brother and her dedication to him that provides her with the necessary courage. Indeed, when Mr Burnham finally coaxes Poppet to speak, 'Bunty didn't do it' are the first words she whispers (p.102). The exchange that follows between the two does little more than to further illuminate 'the child's beautiful trust, affection and courage' as Poppet presents Bunty's case (p.107).

There is significance, however, in the narrative's closure, particularly in terms of its explicit association between heroines and the domestic realm. The courageous Poppet provides the example by which all good girls should measure themselves, a duty to protect and provide for the nation's sons. While the headmaster does praise Poppet, it is ultimately her influence on her brother that will make the world a better place:

> *He told them what the child had done, and praised her high courage and simple faith. 'If,' he said, as he took his leave, 'if all boys had such sisters as little Poppet is, my school would be a better place, and later, the world.'*
>
> (p.109)

One of the texts to appear in both series of reading books, it appears that this story's appeal to selection committees can be read in its overt construction of the ideal female child, a child who will not necessarily 'lead', but who will undoubtedly support those who do.

Shaped by the bush
– producing an ideal Australian child

Of course, other Australian children populate the Readers. Representations of these children serve to reinforce notions of an ideal, uniquely *Australian* child. Inevitably, this child is a product of the bush. In the Readers, the 'typical' Australian child gains strength and stature across genres and across individual narratives as recurrent and inter-related literary themes are unified by one common thread, that of the bush itself. As both a physical landscape and as socio-cultural environment of rural and regional Australia, the bush, and its role in shaping Australian children (particularly its effect on states of childhood) is an ever-present, though often contradictory, element.

'Sunrise in the Blue Mountains' (from Louise Mack's *Teens* and published in the Sixth Book of the *Victorian Readers*) clearly invokes familiar thematic concerns of childhood innocence, particularly the way in which children negotiate the threshold into adulthood. In this narrative, dreams of youth are aligned with the Australian landscape: 'The five girls were all silent. Their eyes, with the dreams of youth in them, were gazing out into the great, silent stretches of mountains rolling back against the sky' (1929, p.4). In a desire to witness sunrise from Govett's Leap in the Blue Mountains, the girls leave home in the early hours of the morning, their departure signifying a physical and symbolic, though temporary, separation from childhood: 'The back gate, when it closed behind them, seemed to shut them out of all reach of the shelter of home' (p.6). More explicitly, their mother (as protector of this childhood) is unaware that her daughters are 'stealing through the piece of rough bush that led down to the road' (p.6).

As in 'Pretty Dick', there are hints of a sensual seductiveness to the Australian wilderness: 'the delicate wild clematis… hid the nakedness of the poor old ring-barked trees under its long white arms of blossom' and even the earth underfoot 'smell[ed] as if it had just been washed' (p.6). Unlike Pretty Dick, however, these children are not tempted to stray into the bush. Nor are there the sexual anxieties that lie just below the surface of the Jane Duff story; the imagery is gentler here than the night cries that assault Jane's nightly vigil. It is not a story of lost children nor of lost innocence, rather it is about the way in which Australian children are formed in relation to the landscape. The nationalist identity of these girls is celebrated as they discover 'the wonder [that] was all new to them – the fair wonder of a mountain dawn' accompanied by billy tea and sandwiches when they are 'miles from home in the heart of the Blue Mountains' (p.9).

Throughout the Readers' production of Australian children and childhood, the role of the bush, as either a malevolent force or as educator (and sometimes as both), is nevertheless the primary ingredient in defining national identity and culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in C.E.W Bean's 'The Youngster', published in the Fifth Book of the *Victorian Readers*. 'The Youngster' values a bush education as integral to a boy's transformation into a man and provides the most powerful example of the superiority of bush children versus their city-educated counterparts. 'They might seem a little simple in the superficial lore of the cities … But they could teach the city man for a month things in which he is a babe' (1930, p.68).

'The Old Bush School', a first-person account of early Australian rural education by Mary Fullerton in the Fifth Book of the *Victorian Readers,* also explores the role of the bush in developing uniquely Australian children. Assumptions of white indigeneity figure prominently in Fullerton's story. The children are literally produced by the natural environment: 'We were a queerly-mixed group of urchins; more of us than one might think from that narrow strip of river flat. It grew children abundantly' (1930, p.42). Furthering the idea of bush children as indigenous to the Australian environment, the children are also tellingly described as a 'little gang of primitives' (p.42). This is significant in relation to themes of national growth in the Readers as it effectively displaces Aboriginal Australians (and their claim to the country) with a new generation of 'natives' whose presence will ensure the nation's continuing development and its white national identity.[3]

My reading of encoded themes of national growth here is neither exhaustive nor inflexible. While I argue that these state school textbooks were effectively constructing an Australian sense of self, such a construction was never static or definitive. Indeed, even this condensed reading of interwoven discourses of children and childhood reveals tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions. I am interested not only in uncovering the thematic concerns of the Readers, but also in problematising them. The idea of the child as leader, however, remains central. It is the ideological production of children by text, the shaping of future Australian citizens, that informs the Readers as prescribed reading material within educational institutions. Hence, contemporary concerns about literacy instruction and subsequent calls for a return to 'tradition' are undermined by those same educational technologies of the past: 'in short the books are not mere manuals for learning to read' (Preface, *Pacific Readers*).

NOTES

When Baynton submitted this short story to the *Bulletin* her suggested title was 'What the Curlews Cried', highlighting the significance of a religious theme that 'fuses the sexual with the symbolic' (Schaffer 1998, p.155).

In the accompanying Reader notes to 'Lost in the Bush', it is acknowledged that 'the main part of the story is from an account written by the Reverend B.W. Fairclough, and printed in a church magazine *The Southern Cross*'. The origins of the text explain its religious sentiments.

In her influential study of Aboriginality in Australian children's literature, *Reading Race* (2001), Clare Bradford reads school texts as 'mechanisms of forgetfulness' that 'seek to make Aboriginal people all but invisible to child readers' (p,21).

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