
Postcolonial Transformation and Traditional Australian Indigenous Story

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Published in 1964, *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*, told by Wilf Reeves and illustrated by his sister Olga Miller, marked a new direction in Australia’s literary history. My examination of the history of traditional Australian Indigenous stories for children has established the first publication by an Indigenous author and illustrator in this genre as earlier than previously thought. As a research fellow in 2004, I assessed approximately 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous representations in this genre. *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* is important not only as the turning point in Australia’s literary history for a child readership, but also in the unique way this picture book challenges colonial assumptions and transforms reader perceptions of Aboriginality and traditional culture. In this paper I analyse the textual and visual strategies employed in the first story map in this collection within the context of postcolonial literary theory. This new reading of an old text is informed by an outline of the historical and social parameters which led to its publication.

The Legends of Moonie Jarl is a collection of 12 traditional stories from the Badtjala people; an east coast Aboriginal community from the Fraser Island-Maryborough region, in Queensland, north of Brisbane. Fraser Island is a large sand island stretching approximately 120km in a general north south direction and between 5 and 22 km wide. The traditional homeland of the Badtjala people includes Fraser Island and the adjacent mainland from the mouth of the Burrum River, south to Mount Bauple and east to Double Island Point. Perhaps surprisingly for a sand island, Fraser Island was covered in extensive forests and freshwater lakes, some perched 70 m above sea level. Abundant fishing and natural resources enabled Badtjala people to live for generations in pre-contact times in balance with the environment and the seasons. Early settler forays into this region also identified the value of the land which has been contested since first contact over 200 years ago. That Badtjala people and traditions survived the colonial wars, government resettlements, church missions, the forestry, mining and tourism industries attests to their resilience and ingenuity.

The Legends of Moonie Jarl was published in 1964 by Jacaranda Press, a small independent publishing house originating in Queensland, which specialized in poetry

and books for the educational market. In the same year, Jacaranda published Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s first book of verse, *We are Going*, selling 7 editions in 10 weeks (Hall 1968, pp. 39-40). Publishing successes enabled Jacaranda to channel funds into initiatives that gave opportunities to new authors (O’Conor 2006). Such was the case when Jacaranda received the manuscript and illustrations for *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* told by Wilf Reeves and illustrated by his sister Olga Miller. Jacaranda published a print run of 5000 copies specifically aimed at the Australian middle primary school reader.

Reeves’ book of traditional stories did not receive the same instant acclaim as Oodgeroo’s collection of verse. Reviews at the time questioned the authenticity of the traditional stories, the mixed race of the teller and illustrator, and privileged earlier non-Indigenous collections of legends. Book reviews mediate a books reception and sometimes they tell us more about the reviewer than the book being reviewed. Mary Durack’s review (Durack 1964-65) published in the *Australian Book Review*, positions her understanding of place through a colonial perspective. She called her review ‘From Mrs Fraser’s Island’, reflecting the misapprehension that the land was empty space until European occupation; in this case until Eliza Fraser’s party of shipwreck survivors landed there in 1836. Multiple versions of Eliza Fraser’s survival have been portrayed in print, in artworks, as television series and motion pictures. Ironically, the version (Miller 1998) to receive the lowest profile, primarily because of Australia’s long history of silencing Aboriginal voice, was presented by Olga Miller to the 1998 symposium *Constructions of Colonialism: Perspectives on Eliza Fraser’s Shipwreck*. At that symposium Miller described the oral histories of Badtjala women who saved Eliza Fraser from starvation by their local knowledge and assistance.

It is appropriate to briefly critique Mary Durack’s review here, because it reflects common beliefs of the time and because her influence on book sales and reader perceptions would have been great. By 1964 Mary Durack had published 10 children’s books in the genres of poetry, fiction and history. Many of her books were illustrated by her sister Elizabeth and drew on their experiences growing up in the early decades of the 20th century on the vast Argyle and



Ivanhoe stations in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia.

Three of their collaborations include *Chunuma* published in 1936, an illustrated story of an Aboriginal boy's growth to adulthood; the picture book *Kookanoo and Kangaroo* published in 1963 portrays in verse an Aboriginal child's attempts to catch a kangaroo; and *The Courteous Savage*, published as an illustrated biography of Yagan, a Bibbulman man from the Swan River region in southern Western Australia. A subsequent edition published in 1976 was renamed *Yagan of the Bibbulmun*. Today we justifiably question the representation of Aboriginality in publications such as these but in 1964 Mary Durack's literary output encouraged recognition of her as an authority on Aboriginal Australians and her opinion was held in esteem. Her review gives subordinate status to *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* by comparison to non-Indigenous authors when she says:

K. Langloh Parker and Keith McKeown covered a rather more comprehensive field of legend and brought their annotations the perspective of their wide reading and experience. The tales of Moonie Jarl, however, though limited, are just as faithfully interpreted and as valuable.

(Durack 1964-65, p.41)

The authors Durack makes reference to had established wide popularity in this genre by the mid 1900s. Kate Langloh Parker's late 19th century and early 20th century collections offered a Western interpretation in speaking for the Noongahburrah people who traveled through her husband's property in northern NSW; while Keith McKeown made a determined attempt to draw scientific analogies as justification for his selection of stories told by the Wiradjuri People of NSW in *The Land of Byamee: Australian Wild Life in Legend and Fact*. Durack's privileging of these non-Indigenous representations reinforces the Western presumption to speak for indigenous people.

Her review also echoes colonial notions of Aboriginal preliteracy eliding into contemporary illiteracy. By claiming Parker and McKeown had 'wide reading and experience' (Durack 1964-65, p. 41) she implies that Reeves and Miller did not. Contrary to those assumptions, Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller were well educated Aboriginal people

and members of the Maryborough Writers Club, whose relationship to their own traditional stories encompassed experience inaccessible to the non-Indigenous authors that Durack's review privileges.

Within this social context, Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller, encouraged by Queensland Adult Education staff, took their manuscript to the door of Jacaranda Press. The Managing Director, Brian Clouston, accepted the narrative in its original three fold format, editing spelling and punctuation. In their narrative Reeves and Miller deploy a number of literary and visual techniques which can be seen as a form of resistance to the confines of colonial presumptions. In his book *Post-Colonial Transformation*, Bill Ashcroft (Ashcroft 2001) describes the various ways the literature of colonized peoples can employ strategies of resistance to colonial ideology in their endeavour to present a changing view of culture. Ashcroft identifies ways colonized subjects 'interpolate', or interrupt, the dominant discourse by a range of resistant practices. Such interpolation can include wresting control of language and writing from imperial hands 'to reveal frictions of cultural difference, to actually make use of aspects of the colonizing culture so as to generate transformative cultural production' (Ashcroft 2001, p.47). Perhaps the most striking and immediate example of this is the use of the Badjtjala term for storyteller, the Moonie Jarl of the title, inserted as a defining challenge to the hegemony of the English language. Other literary and visual techniques employed by Reeves and Miller as forms of postcolonial transformation reclaiming traditional Aboriginal narrative, are identified here.

Each of the 12 stories in this collection is presented in the three fold format of text, story map and key. Each story map consists of a single page illustration composed of bordered divisions, containing numbered elements defined in the key on the opposite page. The divisions are often arranged symmetrically around a vertical, horizontal or diagonal axis. The elements in each division are geometric or figurative representations. Western readers used to reading from left to right and top to bottom need the key to guide them through the non-intuitive arrangement in each story map.

The stories analysed here, 'In the Beginning' and 'The Flying Fox' share this single story map. In this example, configuration of divisions is symmetrical around dual axes; a narrow central vertical axis coloured red and brown and a wider horizontal axis. The key tells us that the rainbow shown in red and brown as the vertical axis is the sign of Beerall, the god of the Badtjala people; the angular black and white symbols in the adjacent triangular divisions are Beerall's sign representing his son Yindingie, the carpet snake, shown coiling up the vertical axis. The white border for the triangular divisions serves to accentuate the importance of the central divisions. Bordering, bold geometric designs, the minimalist representation of a major spirit around which every other element is balanced, the position and direction the snake moves, all combine to define cultural significance.

In contrast to the central geometric designs, the outer yellow divisions on the story map contain representational imagery concerned with behaviour. At the bottom left of the story map figurative designs of a man in silhouette, seated at his fire, surrounded by footprints define never walking between a man and his fire, while on the right the position and stance of each silhouette clearly represents sitting only when invited.

Deborah Bird Rose, a social anthropologist who lived with the Yarralin people of the Victoria River District in the Northern Territory for a number of years during the late 1980s suggests that traditional story for the Yarralin conforms to a set of rules about relationships

The first is balance. A system cannot be life-enhancing if it is out of kilter, and each part shares in the responsibility of sustaining itself and balancing others. The second is response: communication is reciprocal. There is a moral obligation to learn: to learn to understand, to pay attention, and to respond. Third: symmetry. In opposing and balancing each other, parts must be equivalent because the purpose is not to 'win' or to dominate but to block, thereby producing further balance. The fourth is that parts are autonomous... Authority and dependence are necessary within parts, but not between parts

(Rose 2000, pp.44-45)

This story map incorporates these rules by giving priority to the basis of traditional culture with the compelling central imagery, using divisions to compartmentalize aspects of life and culture and containing a pervasive symmetry and balance.

As readers progress through each story in the collection, they develop an ability to recognize symbols. While non-Badtjala readers accumulate understanding, full traditional knowledge remains tantalisingly inaccessible. Non-Badtjala readers faced with their lack of cultural knowledge are positioned as outsiders by the text, even as the text invites them to reach across cultural boundaries.

The spirit Yindingie, plays an instrumental role in each story. Here he is shown both as a serpent and by the black and white geometric design. In the upper yellow divisions Yindingie is represented in human form punishing the flying fox for being a nuisance. In the text both Yindingie and the flying fox observe, interpret and evaluate each other through dialogue; as Rose observed with the Yarralin people, communication is reciprocal. Yindingie is angered by the bat's nuisance behaviour and the bat suffers the indignity of being hung upside down from the limb of a tree. The reader can empathize with the bat's reluctance to admit his foolishness and understand the inference for human behaviour. Twentieth century non-Indigenous compilations often assembled stories like The Flying Fox from a range of Indigenous communities as 'how and why' stories. Set within its cultural and spatial context The Flying Fox story can be seen to have more complex significance than simply why bats hang upside-down.

Altogether the story map has a three dimensional effect. The divisions truncate each other in a way that signifies the everyday, the traditional and their interrelationship. The outer yellow divisions describe everyday life; the yellow background signifies the sand of Fraser Island, where men in silhouette participate in everyday activity invoking protocols and behaviours. The outer divisions are truncated by the imposing triangular divisions of geometric designs, which in turn is overlain by the vertical red/brown axis through which the serpent coils. Thus the spatiality of the story map contains a temporal sense of the inter-relatedness of the ancestral with everyday life.

Visual strategies using colour, recurrent symbolism and layering serve to prioritize traditional beliefs within story as the reader develops a visual vocabulary.

The horizontal division placed central to the story map overlays and truncates all of the elements described above. This division contains the most complex imagery and is defined in the key comprising three numbered elements. In the middle is the figurative design of the Jabirou with head feathers, hitting the Leatherhead with a stick for having stolen his fish. Reeves' text explains that the audience for this story would ask why the Leatherhead didn't avoid his punishment by crossing the creek away from the Jabirou's camp. The answer that it was dangerous to cross elsewhere locates story and behaviour to the specifics of the land on Fraser Island. Locatedness draws the reader into an understanding of a specific culture connected to specific lands. The reader is told that the geometric design to the left of the Jabirou and Leatherhead indicates a dangerous bog further down the creek. The absence of a fuller explanation of many of the symbols used in this collection reinforces a sense of levels of understanding.

Numbered element 6 in the horizontal panel represents Melong, a Badtjala spirit of darkness. The Melong is involved in a number of the stories and story maps in this collection and his figurative representation is quite distinctive. Composed entirely of curved lines, eyes and nose but no mouth, always sitting cross legged with arms curved across the front of his body, always with a cap with between five and eight squiggly protuberances. Capable of making magic to punish behaviour, the Buddha-like figure of Melong is used in this story map to signify a dangerous location. Melong is always drawn accompanied by symbols of magic, shown here on his left and right, though their shape varies from one story map to another. In contrast to the silhouetted figures who participate in an activity, the Melong faces the reader directly, in a confronting pose reinforcing the gravity of the danger with which he is associated. The textual warning of a dangerous place has equivalence visually in Melong's pose and characterization.

Reeves employs analogy to bridge the reader's gap between familiar subjects and knowledge of traditional culture. In the first story in this collection Reeves describes

The Melong of our stories, for instance, would be the witch in fairy stories, the Jun Jaree the fairies and pixies. In Greek mythology the Minguin would be the Oracle, since he also has the power of speech...

(Reeves 1964, p.3)

Cultural difference between Aboriginal peoples is acknowledged. Reeves describes 'The super-human animal, which in my father's stories was called Melong, might well be what some people refer to as the "bunyip"' (Reeves 1964, p.4). The insertion of Badtjala terms as analogy with Western archetypes is one of the strategies of resistance identified by Ashcroft. Badtjala language is used in a transformative rather than oppositional mode, in the capacity identified by Ashcroft as interpolation, because it recasts our perception of the trajectory of power (Ashcroft 2001, p.14). Settlements and missions set up across Australia by the colonizer prevented the colonized people from practicing their own Indigenous languages. Reeves' insertion of Badtjala terms analogous with classical archetypes equates the terms, challenging the hegemony of empire.



Conclusion

Maps operate within the Western schemata of reading to assign a symbol or identifier with a referent. The story maps of *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* marked a new form of illustration in traditional narrative. By deploying Western styles of symbol/referent reading in a non-intuitive arrangement with unfamiliar geometric and figurative representation, they expand map reading into the realm of cultural difference. Though spirit symbols recur they also vary, enabling the reader to develop a visual vocabulary. There remains a tantalizing sense of greater understanding and levels of knowing.

The story map reflects the relationship rules observed by Rose with the Yarralin people. Balance is established around a vertical axis defining ancestral spirits; truncation creates a three dimensional effect prioritizing the central

imagery; communication is reciprocal both in the Yindingie-Flying Fox dialogue and the expectation that the reader will pay attention, learn from the visual clues and respond by working out the shield story in the final story map; symmetry of learned behaviour in divisions 2 and 3 corresponds with Yindingie's lesson for the Flying Fox in divisions 7 and 8; and Rose's fourth rule of relationship, that parts are autonomous, is encapsulated in the divisions of the story map.

Many of the devices identified by Ashcroft as active writing processes affecting reading are evident in *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*. The first of the 12 stories creates a sense of an ancestral time in balance with contemporary traditional culture. The analogies used by Reeves appropriate Western literary archetypes in a transformative functionality. Locatedness to Fraser Island and the Hervey Bay region incorporates a set of traditional beliefs designed to socialize the reader. The interpolation of Badtjala terms in the title and text use language as a form of resistance to imperial hegemony. Rose's work with the Yarralin people recognized that cumulative cultural knowledge plays an integral part in traditional culture (Rose 2000, p.109). The stories in *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* gradually build up an understanding of many aspects of traditional Badtjala culture. The intent to educate the reader is paramount in these narratives.

Both text and story map in *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* can be read as giving definition to the transformative processes enabling an appreciation of cultural difference. That a small print run of a transformative text targeted a child readership reflects an understanding of the longevity required to change social perceptions of imperial hegemony. This book heralded the beginning of an active Indigenous voice in Australian children's literature, encouraging positive self concepts for Australian Indigenous readers while simultaneously positioning non-Indigenous children to engage positively with Indigenous culture. Pivotal in the literary history of Australian children's books, *The Legends of Moonie Jarl* interrupted the dominant discourse of non-Indigenous representation of traditional narrative.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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