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# Ethel Turner and the ‘Voices of Dissent’: Masculinities and Fatherhood in *The Cub and Captain Cub*

Claudia Nelson

In his interesting study *Making the Australian Male: Middle-Class Masculinity 1870-1920*, Martin Crotty argues that turn-of-the-century Australians firmly rejected the androgynous, domesticated gender role that both children’s fiction and the public schools had offered Australian boys in the 1870s: ‘the militarist and nationalist ideals of manliness, as constructed in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australia...[were] extremely tightly-constructed ideals which became less and less tolerant and pluralist. ... in the early years of the twentieth century the voices of dissent were all but completely silenced’ (Crotty 2001, p.223). Crotty notes that Australian manliness was becoming increasingly less nuanced, more focused on animal virility. Although he acknowledges efforts by Australian women to combat ‘anti-domestic masculinism’, as chronicled by Marilyn Lake in her 1986 article ‘The Politics of Respectability’, he finds that women’s ‘success in restraining ... non-respectable masculinist culture’ far outstripped their success in ‘restraining masculinist middle-class ideals, and often served to further them’ (Crotty 2001, p.229).

Work such as Crotty’s should help to inspire any number of reexaminations of the masculine gender role in texts that sought to acculturate young readers before, during, and after the Great War. In this article, I will contend that one influential writer who might be considered in this light is Ethel Turner. Like such figures as Louisa May Alcott (one of her literary models) and L. M. Montgomery, Turner addressed a primarily female audience, a circumstance that has tended in all three cases to direct the bulk of critics’ attention to questions relating to femininity. Yet works for girls frequently take considerable interest in delineating masculine gender roles as well as feminine ones, partly because their authors seek to equip readers to tell good men from bad and partly because femininity is often defined in terms of its differences from—and similarities to—masculinity, differences and similarities that are explored variously through romance, friendship, sibling bonds, and father-daughter relationships. For both reasons, the ‘voices of dissent’ that Crotty finds vanishingly rare in texts aimed at boys and men may be alive and well in stories for girls and women.

Turner’s positive images of fatherhood, in particular,

provide potentially useful correctives to our current understanding of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian visions of gender and family. Yet critics’ attention to Turnerian fatherhood has historically been somewhat cursory, heavily conditioned by the portrait of paternity to be found in *Seven Little Australians* and its three sequels (1894-1928), all of which hold up the father of the seven Woolcots to readerly scorn. John Foster, Ern Finnis, and Maureen Nimon aptly term Captain Woolcot ‘petty, arbitrary, bullying, but not authoritative... a paper-cutout comic figure’ (Foster, Finnis & Nimon 1995, p.19), and because of the series’ popularity, he has long been taken to define Turner’s vision of fatherhood. For example, Brenda Niall’s influential *Australia through the Looking-Glass* notes that Turner’s ‘characteristic family pattern is matriarchal. Fathers are usually defective in some way... but that does not matter so long as the mother is in control’ (Niall 1984, p.89). Other critics gravitate toward the images of paternal abusiveness in other Turner works such as *St. Tom and the Dragon* (1918), in which, as Shurlee Swain, Ellen Warne, and Margot Hillel have pointed out, fatherly discipline is not only excessive but also eroticized (Swain, Warne & Hillel 2003). Richard Rossiter is well-nigh alone in noticing that ‘the most common configuration of male-female relationships in Turner’s fiction was that of the “good” father figure directing the potentially wayward woman onto a straight and narrow path’ (Rossiter 1996, p.67), and he makes this observation only in passing.

Given Crotty’s argument that the era’s definition of manliness was unusually narrow (Crotty 2001, p.223), we might assume that Captain Woolcot’s two-dimensionality mirrors a flatness in the ideal that the Captain was designed to critique. But as Turner’s works and those of some of her peers show, the range of behaviors deemed appropriate at least to the *fictional* Australian male in the early twentieth century was wider than we might suppose: under the right conditions, virility and androgyny could coexist. Although I will look also at the literary context for Turner’s writing, this article will focus primarily on representations of paternity—and especially the fatherhood of daughters—in two of Turner’s underexamined works, *The Cub* (1915) and *Captain Cub* (1917), which as Great War novels

appeared at what Crotty identifies as the apogee of brawny masculinism. By offering an alternative both to this vision and to the vision of Turnerian fatherhood (as either 'harsh or feeble', 'effeminate or unduly cruel' [Niall 1979, p.177; Crotty 2001, p.122]) that Niall and Crotty have proposed, these works permit us to see additional dimensions to the gender models that Australian adolescent fiction offered its readers during and shortly before the war.

The eponymous hero of the *Cub* series is a clumsy, unsociable underachiever of sixteen at the beginning of the first novel, redeemed only by his efforts to serve as a father to little Josette, a Belgian war orphan entering Australia under the sponsorship of fifteen-year-old Brigid Lindsay. In interesting himself in Josette, the Cub also effectively brings up Brigid, since the child-rearing tips and the model of socialist philanthropy that he provides fill the void left by her absent father and worldly mother; the influence that he has on her character is greater than that of either of her parents. Moreover, his family responsibilities motivate him to bring himself up as well, in that he transforms himself from a self-styled flabby and 'miserable pretence of a man' into a strapping soldier ready to join in what Brigid's sister calls the world's 'punishment' through war (E. Turner 1915, pp.218-19, 242). As a military man and disciplinarian, the Cub has points in common with Captain Woolcot, but as an altruist and socialist, he is also the inverse of the selfish and far from idealistic man who figures in the earlier novel.

The second volume brings the return of Brigid's father, whom Josette calls 'Big Cub' (E. Turner 1917, p.31). Mr. Lindsay at once accepts Josette as 'the sweetest and most sacred [charge] he ha[s] ever undertaken' (E. Turner 1917, pp.29-30). Surrogate fatherhood again proves redemptive; it also brings Mr. Lindsay closer to Brigid, his biological child. So similar is Mr. Lindsay's role in the family to that played by the Cub in the first volume that Brigid (now, inevitably, engaged to the Cub) mourns that 'it's like having two lovers that you can hardly tell apart dragging you in opposite directions' (E. Turner 1917, p.215). Together, then, the two novels invert not only Turner's earlier discussion of fatherhood but also

the Oedipus crisis, inasmuch as the biological father is cast as the stranger distracting his daughter from a preexisting bond. Turner wrote a third instalment in 1919, *Brigid and the Cub*, but this final volume is concerned less with fatherhood than with romance. The very absence of the paternal theme in the last instalment suggests that Turner deemed being well fathered a prerequisite for marriageability in women, and displaying paternal talent a prerequisite for marriageability in men. In other words, the Cub's exercise of this skill before and upon Brigid establishes the eligibility of both parties for a happy union, and the romance can only come to full flower *after* the Cub's fatherly skills have been proved.

A striking aspect of both novels, and one that suggests a spiritual kinship to the mid-Victorian British works popular in Turner's youth, is that paternity has much in common with conventional motherhood. Thus, for instance, the Cub's ascetic lifestyle reminds Brigid of her favorite among the nuns who taught at her convent school (E. Turner 1915, p.102), while in *Captain Cub* Mr. Lindsay cements his position with his daughter by teaching her how to wash dishes, explaining, 'The main thing is that the water should be kept hot and there should be so much soap that the grease at once enters into a combination with it'. Brigid writes to her future husband that 'I've just learned how [to wash up] at my father's knee, and regard it now with pride as my most brilliant accomplishment' (E. Turner 1917, p.147).

At the same time, the novels also work strenuously to clear these men of any imputation of effeminacy. The Cub's initial lack of interest in joining the army, which arises from a desire 'to build things up in the world, not destroy them' (E. Turner 1915, p.148), gives way to a passionate wish to protect 'the women and the children' menaced by the Hun (E. Turner 1915, p.215); that is, both pacifism and militarism are manifestations of chivalry. Turner also shows that acquiring the outward signs of manliness should be taken as proof of virtue, inasmuch as when the Cub is rejected for military service because he is insufficiently athletic, he doggedly exercises until he is fit to join the 'clean, strong boys' who make up the Australian force (E. Turner 1915, p.254). Turner's phrase, given in the novel to Brigid, recalls Lake's point

that the war was commonly represented as 'the ultimate proving ground' for manhood, a challenge within which ordinary men might become 'supermen' (Lake 1992, pp.310, 309). Similarly, while the Lindsays' marriage reverses convention in that the wife is the authority figure and the husband the source of tender emotion, an insistence on Mr. Lindsay's strength immediately follows a remark on the depth of his feelings (E. Turner 1917, pp.29-30), and the saga stresses his dedication and success as a 'worker'.

Crotty contends that in the *Cub* books, Turner takes 'little interest ... [in] masculinity as a whole' (Crotty 2001, p.124). Yet the father figures are clearly intended as ideals to be honoured and, presumably, imitated—potentially, by female readers as well as male ones—just as Lake concludes that among postwar feminists, 'The citizen soldier became a model for the citizen mother' (Lake 1993, p.382). Moreover, they satisfy the era's demand that the Australian be what Crotty calls 'a physically fit young man prepared to lay down his life for a good cause' (Crotty 2001, p.223). The androgyny modelled by the Cub and Mr. Lindsay represents not 'masculinity lite' but 'masculinity plus', since the two combine stereotypically masculine traits with an abundance of qualities that the Victorians ascribed to femininity. But while turn-of-the-century British fictions often focus on the male's redemption at the hands of a woman or girl who brings out his latent feminine side, conversely, works by Australian contemporaries of Turner sometimes assume that 'boys must be removed from their mothers to allow them to escape femininity and acquire manliness' (Crotty 2001, p.114). One way that Turner's novel valorizes men's 'womanliness' is by showing them transmitting it to female characters. Although Lake suggests that the rhetoric surrounding the 'procreative Australian man', the soldier-hero who '[gave] birth to the nation', 'at once appropriated and denied' female maternity (Lake 1992, pp.308, 307, 306), Turner emphasizes male-female ties—at least between father and daughters. For evidently, a major reason that men need feminine traits is to be good parents to girls so that the girls may grow up to become good parents as well.

Hence Brigid's sister, Millicent, becomes a true woman

when she learns to scorn her mother's self-indulgence and bargain-hunting; she chides Mrs. Lindsay for 'never... suggesting to us that we should think of other people besides ourselves' (E. Turner 1915, p 238) and compares her parenting unfavorably with Mr. Lindsay's (E. Turner 1917, p.38). In other words, in this era of emphasis on soldierly self-sacrifice (Lake 1992, p.310), it is Mr. Lindsay rather than his wife who instills in Millicent the ethic of altruism that is also crucial to traditional ideals of femininity. Similarly, Brigid, who initially shares her mother's taste for elegance, becomes philanthropic under the Cub's influence. The men model womanhood better than does Mrs. Lindsay; as the latter finally realizes, 'Her girls [are] honourable and love-worthy not because, but in spite of, herself', since she understands 'nothing but the art of living graciously and gracefully' (E. Turner 1917, p.38). And if Brigid's newfound maturity and love for the Cub lead her to raise funds obsessively for war relief and to '[fling] herself with interest into her father's work' (E. Turner 1917, p.186), these activities do not detract from her femininity. Rather, they suggest that women, like men, need to operate in both private and public spheres. Just as the truest men display qualities sometimes labelled feminine, the truest women have their masculine side.

Although the war clearly marked significant changes in the Australian understanding of gender roles, we may see continuity as well. Adapted from earlier British and American sources, the ideas present in Turner's series may be found in Australian adolescent fiction both well after the androgynous ideal began to lose ground in the 1870s, and well before the creation of the image of the 'procreative' soldier in 1915. In other words, they were an artefact neither of the dead past nor of the gender-mixing that sometimes follows upon wartime mobilization.

Thus the 1908 novel *Paradise and the Perrys*, by Ethel Turner's sister Lilian, dwells relentlessly on the extent to which gender roles may need to coincide with biological sex and on the possibility that fathers (or father-surrogates) may be suitable models for young women. The novel's twenty-year-old heroine, nicknamed Theo in apparent homage to Alcott's androgynous Jo March, vows, six

months after her father's death has left the family in financial crisis, 'Every household absolutely needs a man, and this one isn't going to sink into a rut for the want of one. To-morrow I become the man of the family'. But not just any man; Theo proposes to be 'a manly man (like father was)' (L. Turner 1908, p.12). Meanwhile, the next-door neighbors—Harvey Lloyd and his younger brother, Jock—are reversing the Perrys' domestic arrangement by endeavoring to keep house without female aid, since their father is dead in a mining accident and their grief-stricken mother is confined to a madhouse.

To be sure, the novel suggests that neither gender can entirely assume the functions of the other. Harvey wonders 'if a man ever really made a home on his own' (L. Turner 1908, p.158), and Jock, who listens through the wall to catch the Perry family's singing (p.72), has a pathetic, 'unmothered' look despite Harvey's best efforts (p.35); conversely, Theo, who takes Harvey as her model of 'real man[hood]' (pp.120, 123), repeatedly feels that 'she had fallen short at a crisis, failed everyone in an emergency, lost her courage just when it was most needed' (p.106). Nevertheless, the narrative ends with Theo occupying the place of the vanished paterfamilias by bestowing her sister's hand on Harvey. And both Harvey's efforts at homemaking and Theo's efforts to support her family are shown to merit our respect, even if they fall short. The attempt to switch gender roles may be doomed, but it is nonetheless admirable.

The Turners' idea that fathers might be the principal influence turning their daughters into good women also appeared in Australian periodicals for the young. In July 1899, *Australian Young Folks: An Illustrated Monthly for Australian Homes* published Eileen Clinch's 'A Soldier's Daughter'; although the product of an Australian pen, the story has no overtly Australian content, a circumstance that reminds us that British children's fiction (and the often androgynous gender ideals that such fiction contained) remained an important influence even after the development of a homegrown Australian tradition of children's writing. Amini Weston is nine when the story opens and about to be separated from her father, as his regiment is going to the Crimea. He tells her, 'Never forget you are a soldier's daughter', and she remains

mindful of this moral responsibility even after she has gone to live with 'narrow-minded, obstinate' relatives who despise both the military and Amini herself (Clinch 1899, p.2). Although her four young cousins are spiteful liars who belittle her for being 'only a soldier's daughter', she nonetheless risks her life to save two of them when they have a skating accident (Clinch 1899, p.2). As Amini lies 'just alive' after emerging from the icy waters, she dreams of her father and of a regimental band playing 'Home Sweet Home'; meanwhile, her father is dying on a remote battlefield, experiencing a vision of his daughter's face while the band lulls the wounded with the same melody (Clinch 1899, p.2). The story thus makes its point straightforwardly: Amini's truthfulness and courage are both a result and a cause of her psychic bond with her father, a bond that their gender difference in no way diminishes.

And conversely, the *Cubtrilogy's* implication that children may effectively parent their parents (as when Millicent and Brigid assist in Mrs. Lindsay's moral regeneration) appears, rather more fully worked out, in a magazine coedited—and largely written—by Ethel and Lilian Turner before the publication of *Seven Little Australians*. The second volume of this periodical, the *Parthenon*, appeared in 1890 and featured an eleven-installment serial, signed 'Talking Oak' and entitled 'Jim Gascoigne'. While the life of the title character is more melodramatic than that of the Cub, Jim has much in common with the other boy, not least his fatherly tendencies. These are mainly exercised on a mysterious down-and-outer who claims to be Jim's father and to whom Jim has shown an exaggerated devotion (for instance, he goes to prison in an effort to shield the man). He promises from the outset to support his 'father' with both money and love, protecting his 'poor worthless life with [his] own bright young one' ('Jim Gascoigne' 1890, p.102). In other words, he is to supply the shelter that is normally expected to be the parent's responsibility. Later, discipline too becomes necessary, and when Jim has to threaten to cut off the mystery man's allowance, the narrator comments with an explicitness that few readers will need, 'It seemed almost that Jim was the father, and was threatening and scolding a tiresome, frightened child' ('Jim Gascoigne' 1890, p.179).

To complicate the family constellation still further, it turns out that Jim's 'father' is not his father at all, but the father of Jeannie, the woman Jim loves. Moreover, while he loved Jim's father, he also killed him in a fight, an action that he now repents and that Jim forgives him ('We'll be chums to the end', Jim assures him on his deathbed ['Jim Gascoigne' 1890, p.293]). And while Jeannie is understandably inclined to condemn her father not only for his earlier crimes but also for taking advantage of Jim's fatherlessness and vulnerability for so long, her mother won't permit this hostility, asserting that Jeannie's mistaken belief in the goodness of the father she had thought dead 'ennobled [her]' ('Jim Gascoigne' 1890, p.317). This point might be translated to describe Jim's situation as well, since the actions of Jeannie's father have, in effect, turned boy into self-sacrificing hero; if the older generation is deficient in honesty, self-control, love, and basic fairness, these flaws give the younger generation its chance to shine morally. Moreover, as with the Cub, it is the 'fatherhood' of the youthful man that permits the greatest moral brilliance. Still deluded about the mystery man's true identity, Jim dismisses the idea of breaking up the ménage despite his disgust at the other's alcoholism, 'for he knew it was only his influence and the small glimpse of home life that he was able to draw around them, that kept his father from breaking out into more open and wild recklessness' ('Jim Gascoigne' 1890, p.181). This fatherhood, too, looks like motherhood.

H. M. Saxby has noted that the turn of the twentieth century (up to the end of the First World War) was characterized in Australia, as in the United States, by an emphasis on social reform and a change in family dynamics. The influence of figures such as Johann Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, and John Dewey extended to the Antipodes, helping to create a 'child-centred' climate in which 'traditional child-rearing practices came under fire, and there was a gradual relaxation of the formal discipline that had bedevilled the nineteenth century child... there was a quite definite attempt to free children from fear and repression' (Saxby 1969, p.74). Saxby accurately identifies Ethel Turner as one author whose fiction explores the child-centred desire for independence by critiquing the figure of the 'stern' father (Saxby 1969, p.195). And, to be sure, a common turn-of-the-century

plotline in Australia was the temperance tale showing the brutality of the drunken father to his victimized children, another obvious device for criticizing the male. But Australian children's fiction of this era, as works by Turner and other authors show, was not solely interested in condemning fathers as failures. We also find models for an alternative kind of fatherhood—one that is at once strong and gentle, mature and youthful, masculine and feminine, even romantic as well as paternal.

Rossiter suggests that the somewhat peculiar Oedipal configurations present in some of Ethel Turner's fictions should be seen as responses to Turner's own relationship with her second stepfather, Charles Cope. Rossiter quotes a diary entry written by Turner at age twenty, which records that Cope told her when her future husband proposed to her that 'he would far rather bury [her] than give [her] to any [other] man'; for Rossiter, Cope's behavior toward Turner was generally 'aggressively possessive' (Rossiter 1996, p.60). Certainly the family dynamics chronicled in the Cub series, in which the Cub and Brigid's father function in part as rivals for Brigid's affections, invite a biographical interpretation. Yet that Turner's depictions of fatherhood resemble the ideals for Australian paternity circulated by other authors in the immediate pre-war years indicate that more is going on here than a rewriting of personal experience. The conflation of father and lover that appears in *Brigid and the Cub* (1919) both inverts and resembles the pattern established by such earlier novels as Louise Mack's *The Marriage of Edward*, in which thirty-nine-year-old Edward is both husband and foster father to his nineteen-year-old bride, loving her because, as he tells her, 'you were like a child... you seemed so helpless, so confiding' (Mack 1913, p.27). As the narrator explains, Edward 'stood as guardian to this girl, who, after all, was only a child... The world looked upon him as her husband'—but he might also be seen as a substitute parent whose virtue derives from his fiscal and sexual responsibility, his mixture of manly sternness and 'incredible tenderness and softness' (Mack 1913, pp.193, 199).

Some of the emphasis on paternal androgyny and romance evident in Australian youth fiction of this period may be seen as a simple imitation of British models, just as

Clinch's 'A Soldier's Daughter' clearly patterns itself on the fiction appearing in magazines such as the Religious Tract Society's *Boy's Own Paper* and *Girl's Own Paper*, both of which circulated throughout the Empire. As I have pointed out elsewhere, turn-of-the-century British boys' magazines pullulate with father-son romances stressing domesticity, companionate love, and other female-friendly values similar to those highlighted in Australian works (Nelson 1998, p.122). Yet it is also possible to argue that the Australian fictions deviate in significant ways from the fictions of the parent country, partly in response to the particular exigencies of Australian masculinity. One such difference is the replacing of the father-son tie, so central to British boys' fiction, with the father-daughter tie—and, concurrently, effecting a change in audience, since it was not future fathers but future mothers who were the Australian stories' primary consumers. In the context of Lake's argument in 'The Politics of Respectability' that men and women were engaged in a struggle for cultural dominance within Australia, and of Crotty's argument that women were losing this battle, fictions such as Turner's offer a strategy for making domesticity and the new masculinity compatible—even if, ironically, the postwar era would see a fierce struggle between the genders over whose 'procreative capacities' merited greater rewards from society (Lake 1992, p.307; 1993, passim).

Heather Scutter has argued of Turner's rival Mary Grant Bruce that in masculinizing her heroine Norah Linton, 'Bruce's concern is not to erase gender division in the collapsing of the gap between male and female, but to stress the hierarchical importance of the male by making the female all but invisible' (Scutter 1993, p. 21). But while Turner's discussion of fatherhood in the Cub series likewise works to exalt the male, the mechanism by which she elevates him is to show that he can command feminine qualities, a device that would seem to reverse the pattern that Scutter sees in Bruce's work. Females may be inadequate in the Cub books—indeed, as Rosemary Wighton has noted, there are relatively few 'really satisfactory mothers in Australian children's books, especially in the late nineteenth century' (Wighton 1963, p.18)—but the *ideal* of femininity has great importance. Arguably, in narratives such as the Cub series and Mack's

*The Marriage of Edward*, authors remedy women's perceived inability to live up to the standards inherited from Victorian society by inserting fathers into the position that the mother has left vacant. That the result pays tribute both to men and to the concept of motherhood invites a re-evaluation of our understandings of the gender ideals offered to Australian adolescents in the early twentieth century.



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#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Claudia Nelson is the author of *Boys Will be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917* (Rutgers University Press), and *Invisible Men: Fatherhood in Victorian Periodicals 1850-1910* (University of Georgia Press). Her most recent book is *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption in America, 1850-1929* (Indiana, 2003). With Michelle H. Martin she is coediting an anthology of essays entitled *Sexual Pedagogies: Sex Education in Britain, Australia and America, 1879-2000* (Palgrave, forthcoming in 2003). In September 2003 she will take up a position as Associate Professor of English at Texas A & M University.

