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Shaping National Identity: Representations of the Ocean in some Australian Texts

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National identity is a cultural construction. What we think we know about... the Australian character... comes to us through codes of meaning embedded in language and other forms of representation.

(Schaffer 1988, p.8)

Australia has been consistently represented by images of the landscape in literature, film and popular culture; so much, in fact, that the predominant icons associated with the nation are the desert, the rainforest, the bush and the beach. Consequently, the Australian landscape has been instrumental in shaping the ways in which Australians identify themselves and also the ways in which they identify 'Australia', attesting to the power which place and environment have in creating identity. Yet as the landscape shapes us, so too do we shape the landscape. Landscapes are constructs of culture, and are accordingly attributed meaning by the various ways they are represented and interpreted. This is of particular importance in Australia where an idiosyncratic feature of the culture is the tendency to adopt the character of the land. As Graeme Turner argues in *National Fictions*, 'in both film and fiction ... the texts seem to invite us to accept that the land is central to a distinctively Australian meaning' (1993, p.30).

Australians' perceptions of the land and the meanings that have been inscribed into the landscape owe much to the mythological properties attributed to the land and their ideological operation through time, especially given the fact that the country has an almost wholly urban population. In terms of landscape depiction it is the desert and the bush that have most often claimed the imagination of Australian authors. Australia's desert interior has been utilised so often in representations of the nation, Kay Schaffer argues, that the infinite variety of landscape 'has been reduced to a rather singular vision' (1988, p.22). Some five years later, however, a study of Australian adolescents' views of man and landscape in Australia concluded that the beach and the coast figure so much in the Australian way of life that 'a preference for coastal areas seems to convey some distancing from the outback myth ... few students seem to have a clear notion of inland realities' (Oost 1993, p.159).

Andrew Taylor attributes this to the ways in which identity is constituted:

by difference, boundaries, borders, dividing lines ... [all of which] are crucial in order to distinguish what is within from what is without. For Australia ... the nation's border is the coast and, for most of us, this means the beach.
(1996, p.288)

Images of the coast have long been a part of Australia's cultural representations, yet it is only in the last few decades that such a trend has emerged within the literature; the beach and the coast have, in many respects, displaced the outback or the bush as a stock image or theme. A study of recent narratives which express 'Australia' through coastal areas is therefore valuable to an understanding of how national identity is constructed, especially within postcolonial Australia where the coast represents a distinctly Eurocentric setting.¹ The aim of this discussion is thus to examine several Australian children's books which utilise seascapes to gauge how they function in the shaping of national identities. This is achieved by looking at the discursive practices involved in constructing particular versions of 'Australia'.

One of the ways in which Australians have constructed a national identity is in opposition to the British; the relaxed and informal lifestyle so often encapsulated in representations of the country's beaches, for example, establishes a difference to the conservative cultural values of England. It is on the beach that the Australian ideals of nature, classlessness, friendliness, community and egalitarianism are perceived to combine. Beachscapes, often representing nature, work in a similar way to agricultural landscapes by evoking the literary pastoral, and particularly by association with the ideal of childhood: uncomplicated, natural, free, informal and physical (see Stephens 1994, p.76). Like agricultural landscapes, beachscapes are to some degree shaped by culture and thus are infused with a variety of social meanings.

According to Fiske, Hodge and Turner, 'the meaning of the Australian beach ... can be located in at least two contradictory paradigms', which constitute *culture* and *nature*, so that the beaches that represent a dominant Australian myth accept both meanings simultaneously (1987, p.55). Representations of the beach may therefore function to make an ideological comment on the actors who inhabit them; from the isolated surf beaches to those calm bay beaches that are almost extensions of the city, Australian beaches have their own subcultures, codes and practices which are determined largely by type and location. The beaches portrayed in contemporary Australian children's literature generally favour the relaxing and pleasurable beach: those beaches that express a safe version of the ocean, a safety embodied in such figures as the lifesaver and by practices which involve an adherence to family experiences of beach culture as demonstrated in Max Fatchen's *Australia at the Beach* (1999) and Bruce Whatley's *Looking for Crabs* (1992).

Looking for Crabs is set on a long, deserted beach during a holiday when it is too cold to swim. The narrator, his little sister and his parents spend their time looking for elusive crabs in the rock pools at the edge of the beach instead. The shells that cling to the rocks and the clumps of 'Neptune's necklace' found in the underwater pools are distinctly representative of Australian rocky shores. But above the rock pools the beach could be placed anywhere within the world; there are no distinguishing elements of landscape that define Australia in any concrete sense. Australian picture books like Alison Lester's *Magic Beach* (1990) or *Looking for Crabs* belong to the category of picture books which, as Clare Bradford says, 'do not specifically refer to Australia through text or illustrations'; rather, they

represent 'Australia' through the implicit ideologies they construct, the social practices to which they refer, and the clusters of attitudes and values with which they link characters and events, even though their representation of 'Australia' is subordinated to other thematic interests.
(1995, p.111)

Whatley metonymically utilises the myth of the beach to represent Australia as a whole, yet it is the family that

operates primarily to make comments about national identity. A lack of other characters places the focus on the family, and without alternative examples for comparison this family may therefore be regarded as a 'typical' representation of the Australian family, which is emphasised by its adherence to the stereotypical white, Anglo, two child, two (heterosexual) parent family so common in Australian representations. In this case, the linking of the typical family to a setting that is central to Australian culture communicates an orthodox and homogenous image of 'Australia' which is emphasised by characters who either have no name or are called 'Mum', 'Dad' or 'my little sister'. The general theme of the book is the search, suggested by a lexical cluster constituted by words such as 'find', 'look' and 'hiding'. It is evident from the illustrations that the search is for crabs. However, I would suggest that the 'missing' elements of the setting—the lack of background, and the stylised shore crab (which is not scientifically identifiable, unlike its habitat)—function to create a simultaneous search for an Australian culture or identity.

Rather than the continual production and reproduction of value systems by which contemporary theorists define culture, *Looking for Crabs* appears to encode the search for a monolithic concept of identity which, on close inspection, is primarily achieved by what Turner terms 'looking to America'. According to Turner:

Largely due to the success of America's export of its popular culture, Australian and American contemporary popular cultures reflect a close ideological alignment over an idealised image of a desirable way of life.
(1994, p.97)

Whatley portrays the leisured lifestyle of the white, obviously middle-class family that epitomises the corresponding middle-class American myth; the children are smaller versions of their stereotypically gendered parents, they adorn themselves with logos of Mickey Mouse and basketball, associate holidays with Hawaii, and eat hot dogs for lunch. It is thus significant that this book was shortlisted by the Australian Children's Book Council in 1993, during a period when, according to Turner, Australia incorporated many aspects of American

culture into its own, such as the Movie World theme park 'Hollywood on the Gold Coast' and the 'Yo! Way to Go' Queensland tourism campaign.²

In contrast, Max Fatchen and Tom Jellett litter *Australia at the Beach* with a multitude of recognisably Australian icons. The red and yellow flags, the thongs, the sunscreen, the seagull, the beach cricket set, the bodyboard, the esky, the jetty, the beachfront caravan park, the surfers, the fish and chips, the sausage roll, the fishing rod, the sheltered picnic areas, and the barbecues of *Australia at the Beach* act together as a group of signifiers, clustered around the concept of 'Australia'; they operate to project a set of ideas or a code of meaning that expresses an ideal image of the Australian beach. The bright, clear colours that Jellett has used to illustrate the text also emphasise the distinctly Australian setting; shadows and highlights are reminiscent of summer light and the cloudless skies so typically associated with holidays at the beach. This could be any beach within Australia; in fact, at times it appears to be several different beaches. Nevertheless, the Norfolk Pines, esplanade, yellow sand and the beach's suburbanised quality (and thus its adherence to 'culture') seem to locate it within the Sydney region, as does the lifesaver, who symbolises a 'national type', a figure that is 'metonymic of the city—particularly Sydney' (Fiske, Hodge and Turner 1987, p.65). The location of this beach therefore has significance and carries with it a multitude of cultural meanings when linked with the Australia Day holiday when the narrative is placed.

The narrative follows the day from morning until evening, representing the ocean as a live and participatory member of the holiday by giving it anthropomorphic qualities. It is quiet in the morning, then stretches far and wide, evoking images of sleeping and waking. Immediately afterwards it spreads out a tablecloth of tide, the text linking with the image of the donut truck directly underneath it (p.4). At this stage the busy esplanade is juxtaposed against the calm of the ocean as a 'lazy sea breeze sings', creating the ambience of the holiday while simultaneously suggesting the day's activities are well underway (p.7). By late afternoon, however, 'the sunset sea sounds sleepy' and the evening star appears to emphasise the point (p.30); 'It's school again tomorrow' says the narrator, reinforcing the idea of the beach as a

place for a holiday and an escape from rule-bound suburbia (p.32). The personification of Australia and its wonderful beaches is enhanced by the use of positive terms such as 'shining', 'warm', 'fresh', 'inviting', and the use of the affectionate 'Australia, dear'. When coupled with the unified nature of the character's interactions as illustrated by Jellett, there is a sense that 'Australia' can be viewed fondly and apolitically. Such a reading position is problematic, however, particularly when the book is viewed firstly in economic terms, and then when considerations of race, ethnicity and gender are taken into account.

Australia Day is, for coastal dwellers, traditionally a public holiday centred around the barbecue and the beach. Supposedly, it is also the most important national holiday, yet its significance in the minds of most Australians, argues Turner, does not equate with the popular conception of a fiercely nationalistic country. Settler societies, preoccupied with the issues of legitimacy and authenticity, need to be *taught* how to celebrate and form a national identity, he claims, suggesting that the advertisements, documentaries and patriotic promotions which accompanied the bicentenary were deliberately designed to deal with a possible lack of enthusiasm by Australians. The excessive nationalism of the time found a commercial outlet through the merchandising of souvenirs and products and it seems that this pattern has been repeated since Sydney's bid to host the 2000 Olympic Games was successful, putting an economic rather than sporting slant on the event.³ I suspect that *Australia at the Beach*, published on the eve of the Olympics and amidst the nationalist hype that seized the country at this time, is part of that commercialism. A preoccupation with national identity seems to accompany major national events, and this is evident within the book, positioned as it is during a period concerned with projections of a national image to the rest of the world. Thus an examination of the characters and their actions within *Australia at the Beach* will divulge information about the version of 'Australia' that Fatchen and Jellett have constructed for the reader and the wider international audience.

Unlike *Looking for Crabs*, there is a reasonably diverse representation of Australian people, both families and individuals. The Anglo family at the centre of the narrative

is composed of three children, their parents and their grandfather, which is at least a small deviation from the stereotype. On the back cover a line of beachgoers wait for the shower, and on the title page a variety of people mingle on a section of jetty. The prominence of these small snapshots on the book's cover defines them as representative of the book as a whole, and Jellett has chosen to depict a variety of skin tones, ethnicities and ages. There is at least one person from a non-Anglo background on each page, and the different sizes, hair and skin colours of the characters within the scenes would seem to suggest that close attention has been paid to representing a nation of diversity. Nevertheless, the dominance of the Anglo-Australian implies that this is only a token acknowledgement of other cultures, especially as all the characters have an aura of sameness about them. This is supported by John Stephens' study of picture book landscapes in which he suggests there is a schema for Australian society; one particular feature implies that it is

a centripetal society: that is, all of its aspects spiral inwards towards a common set of values and aspirations. It is characterised by homogeneity rather than diversity; actual multiculturalism, for example, is contained within this centripetal movement.

(1994, p.70)

The hazy divide separating nature from culture epitomised by the beach is a salient example of those homogenous qualities; it is on the beach that many aspects of culture are left behind and that a common hedonistic and relaxed way of life is realised.

That *Australia at the Beach* expresses 'Australia' through such a setting only enhances Stephens' argument. The lone, leather-clad biker sitting on a sand dune and the large, bald man wearing leopard-skin swimmers, for instance, are the only figures expressing any individuality as far as clothing is concerned. Naturally, some type of clothing is more appropriate for the beach than others (although sunglasses are almost entirely absent and hats in the minority), and Jellett is constrained by how much information he can illustrate on one page, particularly within a book with so many people). Nevertheless,

preference is given to the traditional ideology of the sporty, outdoors-loving, classless and friendly character over any other. Different versions of 'Australia' will inevitably privilege different groups or values over others; traditional representations of the Australian character, for example, exclude women by their masculine bias. The myth of the Aussie battler, the active and unpretentious bloke who is characterised by a close relationship to the land, would seem more closely connected to Australia's pioneering past. But this figure still occupies a prominent place within the national consciousness and finds a place within *Australia at the Beach*. Gender roles are reversed in some instances—a single father pushes a pram and another pedals his child around on the back of his pushbike—and for once it is a man who has difficulty assembling something (pp.6-7, 29). The beach represents an escape from the more rigid structure and ordered existence of suburban life, resulting in a blurring or contesting of gender roles (see Bradford 1994, p.95). Nevertheless, this is only a tokenising gesture; the majority of the men are depicted as active—playing cricket or football, rollerblading, kayaking, sailing, fishing, surfing, driving (tractors, buses, and cars) and packing the car—while the women are in the main involved in activities such as serving lunch, spreading towels, sunbaking and looking after children.

It is also pertinent that the book expresses nationalism through Australia Day, the annual observance of the beginning of British settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788. For many people Australia Day represents exclusion as it is associated with the celebration of a geographically small, but extremely powerful nation's colonisation of another people's land. While the building of a large sandcastle on pages fourteen and fifteen—a common practice on the beach—is not significant in itself, it is used to display the Australian flag and thus signifies ownership as it suggests the appropriating acts in which colonisers took possession of colonised lands. Further, the nominated princess of the castle, presumably the sister of the Anglo female narrator implied by the text, is wished 'a happy reign'. The Aboriginal flag is perched next to the Australian flag, but becomes a poor attempt at illustrating reconciliation or diversity when it is placed amidst a sea of Anglo faces. This image only seems to

highlight the marginalisation of the indigenous population, especially as the Australian flag not only appears on the sandcastle, but on a t-shirt, a towel, and next to a small catamaran. Such an overt display of nationalism is echoed within the text, particularly by the narrator at the end of the book when she says: 'thanks for seas and beaches, Australia dear' (p.32).

From *Australia at the Beach's* representation of 'Australia' it is apparent that singular or homogenous definitions of national identity function politically by obscuring difference and division through deference to the majority. This is magnified by the beach setting; it represents a retreat from culture and hence the political and socioeconomic aspects of culture, such as history and class, are elided (see Turner 1993, pp.36, 108). No text is exempt from history, however (including landscapes which may be read as texts); a culture's texts are, in fact, produced from within that culture, and determined to a large extent by its history. Yet historical events carry vastly different meanings, depending on who is telling the 'story'. In other words, history is subjective; it depends on a point of view for its communication. National identity may therefore be articulated in a variety of ways as the production of concepts of national identity relies on a multitude of histories and experiences. This means that there is no monolithic or singular version of 'Australia', yet the nation's narratives do operate discursively to express a national ethos through a system of meanings that is specifically Australian, and although these narratives have been constructed in a variety of forms throughout history, there are several defining structures which reveal a commonality of experience between people of particular groups. Narratives which draw on the experiences of the British colonists, for example, are characterised by journeys and explorations, and frequently embody a motif of survival; these elements have been so consistently employed in Australian narrative in the past that they have not only attained mythic proportions, but continue to feature in representations of Australia today.

The first journey that any person bound for Australia from Europe had to undertake was the long and arduous sail across several oceans. The ocean was the single medium of transport that the British settlers had available to them; it also provided the only links with the rest of the

world and with 'home' through communication and supplies. For the disillusioned new arrival, the ocean also represented the only route to flee a land perceived as harsh, hostile and inhospitable, yet it also acted as a prison, and the ocean surrounding it virtually cut off any attempts to escape. It often prevented entry too, as the hazardous seas and cliff regions of southern Australia and the reefs of the north and west claimed many ships and many lives in the course of a century or more of oceanic transport. This made the first coastal settlements dependent on the safe waters of the harbour, the bay or the estuary for the mooring of boats; the ocean in this case represented security and these tranquil waters quickly became the sites for leisure and social activities. The ocean has therefore always occupied a prominent place within white Australian history, however, it is reflected ambivalently in the national consciousness; it functions to embody destruction, isolation, imprisonment and threat on the one hand, and security, tranquillity, sustenance and promise on the other (see Taylor 1993, pp. 211-2). In contemporary Australia, representations of the ocean commonly call on the tranquillised ocean in the form of the beach to communicate a place within culture; they figure primarily as sites for leisure, recreation and relaxation, yet the destructive ocean has a place too.

It often belongs to those narratives which engage with the past to construct national histories, such as Rosemary Hayes' novel *The Silver Fox* (1997). Hayes utilises the cliffs of the Victorian coast to create a setting for the narrative. Also called the Shipwreck Coast, this region was hazardous to the vessels bound for Melbourne and the east coast of the continent from Europe. The *Loch Ard* shipwreck, around which the novel hinges, occurred in 1878 near Port Campbell; all of the settlers journeying to Australia were killed in the disaster except two and it is their story that provides the link from the past to the present. The coastal setting in this case functions with the shipwreck in a way that articulates a familiar narrative tradition and evokes the images and themes of early colonial writing. The land as both a threat and a promise has been inscribed within the national consciousness since European settlement, an ambivalent approach most often applied to the desert, but which can be extended to the coast and the ocean. For John Martin, the ex-Irish terrorist whom Emily saves, Australia

represents a chance to escape the past, and a new life, a theme often articulated in Australian literature which deals with the colonial past. The connection to Europe is constantly maintained to emphasise the historical nature of the narrative; all of the characters' names are English, the museum dedicated to the wreck and the artefacts salvaged from it create a tangible link to the past, and the cliffs and the heath surrounding Port Campbell are reminiscent of the English coast.

Hayes focuses on a theme common to settler societies, that of transplantation, a theme relevant to the author, who spent most of her life in England, but lived in Australia for several years prior to writing this novel. At the heart of the story is Emily's silver fox charm and the fox that she sees in the garden late at night; not a native animal, it was imported during the 19th century by Europeans and so operates as a symbol of the European presence in a new land. Emily's mother also spends hours coaxing plants to grow in what is described as 'the salty atmosphere and hostile soil' (p.2); this view of the Australian land and the careful tending of the garden are distinctly European. All of these elements work together to create meaning from the concept of distance and have a resemblance to what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra call expatriate syntax, which is characterised by references to the quest and the arduous journey, and in which the end and the beginning become analogous to the distance between Australia and Britain (1990, p.153). The images of a tough and challenging environment not only belong to this syntax, but embody the metaphor of the land and the ocean as a threat. The Port Campbell area with its windswept heathland, the dangerous rocks and the beaches where the white sea spray hurls itself through the narrow gorges (pp.78, 80) belongs implicitly to nature rather than culture. The clifftop terraced gardens, the small town and the tourist trade bring the two together—interestingly, most often on the beach. However, the sound of the ocean pounding rhythmically against the rocks (p.2) serves as a constant reminder of the association with nature; culture belongs to the nearby city of Melbourne, sprawled around the calm bay rather than in close proximity to the wild cliffs region.

The ocean determines who will live and who will die as the *Loch Ard* shipwreck cemetery, set looking over the

ocean, testifies: the Irish terrorists face death in their sinking rubber boat; Emily's niece Pippa almost drowns; and even Emily and James must battle with the strong tide, the rips and the waves that threaten not only to hamper their quest, but to take their lives too. The ocean functions almost exclusively in a destructive manner, in opposition to the relatively benign beach, yet an ambivalence is also evident: Emily loves the ocean and the coast where she has grown up, and this area figures as a spiritually fulfilling place to Emily's mother, a local artist. For James it is also special; he meticulously records images of the birds and their habitats and will fight the wishes of his parents to follow his dream and become an artist too. Like landscapes, these images of nature are products of culture, however, and are therefore pervaded by ideology. This expression of love for the land, the representation of the country and the intimate knowledge associated with it, is an integral part of the identity-shaping process. Within Australia these images are also constructed out of a need for legitimation; the right to belong in a country appropriated from a people for whom the land and sea is intimately bound to, and inseparable from, the self.⁴ Hodge and Mishra point out that Australian culture is characterised by the quest for legitimacy (1990, p.x). Such a quest is represented symbolically in *The Silver Fox* as the primary theme of the novel centres around the real and the imaginary. Emily's mother and James both paint and draw images of the coastal landscapes of Port Campbell which are notable for their adherence to the 'real', and Emily's visions are so real and vivid that she feels they are happening at the time. The cemeteries, plaques and artefacts salvaged from the wrecked ship, museum and history books all serve to legitimise the narrative's version of history. The historical novel usually employs a realistic mode, yet it is enhanced by the juxtaposition with the imaginary or fantasy element in this case. The concept of belief functions simultaneously with the reality theme also and is encapsulated by the symbol of the fox. Within Western mythology, the fox represents cunning and deceit; it is a creature not to be believed and thus linked with Emily, whose visions and knowledge of impending disaster (which are aligned with the Emily of the past who has the same visions) are ridiculed by everyone except for James.

Stephens suggests that there is an expectation on the reader's part that the symbolic and thematic elements of a novel will coalesce to make sense and that some sort of closure will be produced from the organisation of materials into causal relationships. The implication for historical fiction is that meaning is created or discovered where it does not exist (1992, p.236). The larger thematic pattern of *The Silver Fox* assigns meaning to the events of the past and connects them to those of the present. James and Emily's physical test against the life-threatening ocean and the towering cliff closely resembles that of Eva Carmichael and Tom Pearce, the two shipwreck survivors, while Emily's story of an impending disaster involving the ocean is ridiculed and duplicated in the past by another Emily who faces the same disbelief when she tries to warn the community about the *Loch Ard*. The silver fox, a family heirloom forged in Ireland, also appears as a constant symbol of the interconnections between Australia and Britain. The joining of the two elements, past and present, is signified by the final (somewhat mawkish) scene in which Aunt Sophie clicks together her half of the charm with Emily's:

Sophie put the single charm back on to the chain and replaced it round Emily's neck. 'They belong together,' she said.

Emily moved her bandaged hand to touch the fox. 'It's complete now,' she said. And they both knew that Emily wasn't just talking about the two silver foxes, finally forged into one.

(pp.178–179)

This symbolic emphasis on making things 'whole' and making the past into an image of the present (which is assisted by identification with Emily, the focalising character) tends to collapse the two into one another, creating a sense of the 'universality of human experience' which effectively denies the experiences of others (Stephens 1992, p.238). The transformation of 'history' into narrative is inherently ideological and this has particular significance in Australia where the history of the country has been written by the colonising people. While personal and national identity is often constructed through genealogy, race or culture, and *The Silver Fox* provides such an avenue for Anglo-Celtic or European descendants, Australian historical novels for children which have 'universals'

inscribed into them encourage the practice of disregarding or marginalising other cultures or ethnic groups, making these texts complicit in what Hodge and Mishra call the 'imperialist enterprise' (1990, p.x).

Nevertheless, *The Silver Fox* does belong to a recent genre of Australian children's novels which engage with the past (and specifically with shipwrecks) to construct national histories, including Deborah Lisson's *The Devil's Own* (1990), Elaine Forrester's *Straggler's Reef* (1999), Barry Klemm's *The Last Voyage of the Albatross* (1998) and Gary Crew's *Strange Objects* (1990). Mythmaking, an inherent part of the cultural identity-shaping process, has particular importance in white Australia where perhaps a sense of rootlessness and dislocation stimulates the need to mythologise the landscape (Hills 1991, p.18). As Ross Gibson explains in *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, '[a]lienation and the fragility of culture have been the refrains during two hundred years of white Australian images and stories' (1992, p.64).

This argument may also be applied to Colin Thompson's picture book *Sailing Home* (1996). It draws on distinctly Australian icons such as Sydney Harbour, littered with sails and ships, to signify a modern Australia, yet locates the narrative in a colonial context symbolised by the nineteenth-century home of the protagonist's family. With its corrugated tin roof, detailed verandah rails, brick chimney, large front garden and numerous trees, the house is implicitly linked to the past; juxtaposed against a treeless suburban landscape with buildings which reflect a more contemporary style, it also operates as an emblem of an *idealised* colonial past.

Once the house is carried away out to sea, it functions metonymically to represent 'Australia'. This occurs in an imitation of the biblical Noah story with the rain, the storm and the ocean as the impetus for the journey:

All night it rained, and in the kitchen, the cat sat on the table and watched his bowl float across the floor...In the morning they all woke late to see nothing but sea. During the night the tide had risen and carried them slowly away.

(pp.6, 8)

The journey across the ocean is reminiscent of the journey by ship from England to Australia as the family drift around in the water for several months, and also of the voyages made by European explorers to the southern hemisphere. The family sail past Tristan da Cunha, an island off the southwest tip of Africa which is a territory of Britain; is carried past the Patagonian region which encompasses the Falkland and South Georgia Islands (both British possessions) and visits the South Sea islands, all in a rough duplication of James Cook's voyages. This link to England is also encapsulated by the family's adherence to civilisation. To create an identity of its own, free from existing schemata, Australian identity has often been constructed in opposition to England, yet Australian culture owes much to European traditions. The house therefore functions in this instance as a symbol of society and the civilised world, particularly as it is associated with the city (and thus culture), and it floats away in its entirety so that order can always be maintained; dinner can still be served in the dining room, the fire can burn in the proper place, domestic tasks can be carried out, tea can be served on the verandah and even kings and queens can be entertained (albeit in the kitchen!).

Many of the meanings articulated in the book have their origins in England, but also function in an Australian context. The inhospitable and untameable version of nature is rendered in opposition to the cultured interior of the house on the double-page spread where the house sails past Patagonia, for instance (pp.12-13 and pp.14-15). A hurricane has turned the sea 'reckless', ferocious rocks have made the water boil, the sun has fled amidst the mist and the wild, cold air, and the storm is playing with the house like a toy boat. The family sits in the traditionally furnished dining room, eating dinner next to a roaring fire; even the cat is curled up on the lounge. The viewer is positioned to identify with the cosy room shaded in warm tones by creating a perspective which enables them to look out from within the room through the window, a common technique in the book for privileging the home and the civilised world associated with it over the wild, and often threatening, natural environment outside. The view in this case is expressed in terms which immediately evoke associations with imperialist frames of reference: 'Although they hadn't

seen land for weeks and had missed the feeling of grass beneath their feet, this desolate land was no place for people' (p.14). The book is dedicated to all those suffering from 'drought' which also calls up images of the hostile desert. The seas of the tropics where Peter's family sail to next encompass tiny, lush islands with white beaches which are almost as far from culture and society as the desolate tip of South America, and although Peter's granny wants to stay, his mother says that 'This is not a place to stay ... This is just a place to rest' (p.24), calling to mind the tropical hideaway beach which Fiske, Hodge and Turner suggest 'is reserved for holidays, preferably outside Australia'; it is the metropolitan or urban (and thus cultural) beach that contributes to everyday existence (1987, p.54). The lack of air and sea traffic in these areas dominated by ocean makes Peter's mother nervous at any rate, implying that she would feel much more comfortable back in 'society'.

The return to the south and to Sydney Harbour is therefore a joyous occasion which is signalled by the helicopters, hot-air balloon, news crews and people lining the beach, and emphasised by the number of ships and yachts bobbing on the water, consistent with typical images of Australia's national celebrations. As the title implies, this is a homecoming, and one which is entirely appropriate to white Australia, as the young society of non-Aboriginal Australia is a country 'underendowed with myths of "belonging"', says Gibson (1992, p.64). The fragility of culture or the sense of homelessness which goes hand in hand with this idea is perfectly embodied on pages eight and nine where the tiny house floats in an immense ocean, 'the horizon [as] flat and blue as far as the eye [can] see'; the house's seemingly aimless drift in the ocean (it is reliant on oceanic and atmospheric currents for the journey) emphasises this further. This sense of homelessness and the desire for origins owes much to colonial systems of meaning; it also leads to a desire for a firm notion of national identity which has certainly been a preoccupation of Australia since at least the late 1800s. The link from the colonial to the modern Australia is symbolised by the ropes which join the house to the truck and graders, implying that the Australia represented within the book owes everything to its colonial origins, and thus it is pertinent that it is Peter's grandmother who

sits in the cab of the grader. This earthmoving equipment not only accords with the privileging of culture over nature, but is also a symbol of progress, emphasised by the fact that the dozer, grader and truck are pulling the house forward (onto the land), and as the house's position amongst the icons of modern culture indicates. *Sailing Home* is therefore primarily an articulation of nation which in the final pages becomes a strident assertion, encoded by the large war ship and submarine. But this is a version of nationhood heavily reliant on the colonial past and suggesting that the postcolonial state is one of insecurity.

The journey and the triumphant homecoming presented in *Sailing Home* therefore involves a construction of history which effectively serves to deny the unsavoury impacts of colonisation and to justify the colonising power's conquest by the merging of an idealised past with a progressive present. This is also evident to a large extent in *The Silver Fox*, as the symbolic emphasis on making things 'whole' and turning the past into an image of the present suggests. The beach setting operates in a similar way as it represents a retreat from culture and hence many of the political and socio-economic aspects of culture, such as history and class, are absent. As *Australia at the Beach*'s monolithic concept of national identity demonstrates, this inevitably results in the construction of an homogenous version of Australia which has little in common with the diversity of either its population or its geographical features. The articulation of a common identity that is expressed so overtly in *Australia at the Beach* does rely on recognisably Australian icons to do so, unlike *Looking for Crabs* which ultimately effaces 'Australia' by replacing it with 'America'.

Stephens argues that represented landscape functions as a sign-system, with one of its signifying possibilities being to 'function as a metonym for an aspect of cultural heritage' (1994, p. 71). This is apparent in *Australia at the Beach*, *The Silver Fox* and *Sailing Home*, which express the concept of nation through sites of historical significance, such as Sydney and the Harbour or the Shipwreck Coast. In a historical context, the ocean has featured prominently in constructions of national identity; texts which use this setting and rely on the past to

communicate national identity thus owe much to colonial systems of meaning, as *The Silver Fox* and *Sailing Home* demonstrate in the ambivalent attitudes they display towards nature, and specifically towards the ocean. In these cases, the ocean functions to evoke a sense of homelessness and exile, and to embody destruction; yet it also expresses possibility, hope and freedom, and offers a sense of belonging to the protagonists.

E. R. Hills notes that 'The need to shape the landscape into recognisable and meaningful narratives becomes a search for cultural identity which helps to offset a deep sense of dislocation' (1991, p. 18). Perhaps this accounts for the fierce adoption of the beach as an Australian icon: its place within the Australian consciousness would suggest that it is not only central to the culture, but integral to the nation's concept of identity, as suggested by a quotation which Fiske, Hodge and Turner take from the *National Times*: 'Australia means the beach' (1987, p. 53). Australians are therefore positioned to have certain expectations about coastal scapes which may not only be attributed to the processes of intertextuality, but owe much to the mythic properties attributed to the ocean and their ideological operations through time. As John Stephens argues: '[t]he more an audience recognises itself in the landscape...the more apt it will be to recognise itself by the landscape' (1994, p. 72). Our world or 'reality' is often constructed in terms of mythologised place, which is clearly expressed by the use of important historical sites to communicate meaning to the reader, and evident in the systems of meaning established during the colonial period which continue to find expression in narratives today. While reliant on an historical context to some degree, the process of defining Australia is changeable over time, as the contradictions in meaning assigned to coastal scapes demonstrates. This contradiction occurs because different constructions of nation inevitably encompass a multitude of histories, experiences and points of view, although too often preference is given to the dominant Anglo culture, especially in the Australian context; the consistent and prolific reproduction of the beach and the coast as predominant signifiers of Australia suggests as much. Fiske, Hodge and Turner argue that 'the concept of Australia exists only as long as we all agree on the commonalities between our individual

versions' (1987, p.xii) and while this study implies that there is a system of meanings that is specifically Australian, such a statement fails to take into account the issues of power in dominant representations of nation which are evident, for example, in *Sailing Home*. Nevertheless, the centrality of the coast to the Australian culture suggests that seascapes should be marked as sites of special interest in analyses concerned with the functions of landscape representation within cultural discourse.

NOTES

1. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin use the term 'post-colonial' to 'cover all of the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day' (1989, p.2), and it is used in this discussion in the same way.
2. Here I draw on Turner's chapter 'Looking to America' in *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (1994).
3. For a thorough investigation of the 1988 celebrations, see Turner (1994), Chapter 4: 'Picnic at Ayers Rock: The Bicentenary'.
4. 'Understanding Country', the *Key Issue Paper No. 1* by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation says, 'For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those living in urban areas of Australia, the significance of land and sea is intimately bound to the spirituality surrounding the origins of landscapes and sea-scapes, and the animals, plants and peoples that inhabit them' (Smyth 1994, p.3).

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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