



## When Australia Calls: The English Immigrant in Australian Children's Literature

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Of late, the 1950s has had a particularly bad press. Although it was a time of peace, plenty and general contentment, and Australia seemed to be a golden land offering endless opportunity and affluence, it has been much maligned as a dreary era ruled by insularity and parochialism, as a time of conformism and very strict social divisions which worked to the detriment of minorities of people including suspected Communists, feminists, gays, migrants and Aborigines, all of whom were branded as subversive. And yet, perhaps the 1950s can also be seen - somewhat provocatively it is true - as a turning point in Australian life. As Lesley Johnson has rightly observed, despite the cocoon of somnolence and smugness that some commentators felt threatened at times to suffocate the country, other writers were regularly describing the nation as a 'lusty youth' or 'adolescent' on the verge of adulthood; it was constantly seen as 'coming of age', or moving into 'maturity' (Johnson 1993, p.49). The face of Australia was steadily but inexorably altering, even if the full force of these changes was not manifest until the following decades.

In the 1950s Australia was still geographically isolated from the rest of the world, and on the whole Australians were undeniably insular. Their narrow-minded outlook was due not only to Australia's distance from the rest of the world, but could be partly attributed to its Anglo-Saxon-Celtic homogeneity (even at the end of the decade this still accounted for well over 90% of the population), and its insistence, at least at the start of the decade, upon viewing England as 'the Mother Country'. Inspired by the spectacular toadyism of the anglophile Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, who viewed Australia as a remote frontier white settlement and sighed regretfully at the passing of the day when the British Commonwealth was an Empire of like-minded British peoples, many Australians had an overtly affectionate attachment to Britain. According to Sir Frederick W. Eggleston, for example, Australia was a lucky outpost of a far greater empire:

*Australia is a British community loyal to the English crown and following the English way of life. It has adopted English political institutions, the English financial system and English common*

*law. The English pattern as a whole fits the community best. England is 'Home'.*

(Eggleston 1953, p.6)

Speaking later in the decade the Scottish editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, John Douglas Pringle, indicated something of the unreality and often gross sentimentalisation which permeated many Australians' attitudes towards England:

*They are still proud to be a British nation. Their hearts still beat to the rhythm of England and they carry in their minds an image of 'home' which often bears little relation to the truth.*

(Pringle 1958, p.14)

Such idealisation of Britain and British culture was universal in the 1950s, according to the writer Christopher Koch:

*No English man or woman will ever be able to experience what a colonial Australian or New Zealander of British descent felt about England. We were subjects in no mortal country. Hidden in our unconscious was a Kingdom of Faery: a Britain that could never exist outside the pages of Kenneth Grahame, Dickens and Beatrix Potter.*

(Koch cited by Bennett in Hergenhan 1988, p.437)

The 'nearness of Australia to Great Britain both in time and feeling, and the conscious and deeply felt unity of the Commonwealth' would seem, from contemporary accounts, to be embedded in the national psyche (Murray 1953, p.4).

The apogee of identification with Britain undoubtedly coincided with the two-month Royal Tour of 1954, when the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth was greeted by rapturous and tumultuous crowds wherever she went. When she arrived at her first port of call, Sydney Harbour, for instance, the shores were filled with half a million people, while a further million people lined the route that she was to travel. The semi-hysterical reaction of the overawed crowds was echoed by the hyperbolic and hagiographic front page copy of virtually every newspaper in the land. In an age in which the royals preserved and

even assiduously cultivated their mystique - the press was not allowed to publish pictures of the royal couple eating or drinking like ordinary mortals, for example - only prose of an exaggeratedly mawkish type seemed to express the veneration felt by the nation as it was tantalised by the last, heady whiffs of imperialistic splendour (Lawson 1990, pp.291-4)

For although few observers would then have realised it, the Royal Tour occurred at a time in which the Empire, and its influence in Australia, was waning. Although Australian loyalty to the Commonwealth was still enormously strong, it was increasingly a matter of sentiment rather than policy, and a cultural reorientation of an entirely different kind was taking hold of society, indicating the dramatic changes that had taken place in postwar Australia. A decade earlier, faced with the crisis of the Fall of Singapore in 1941, Prime Minister Curtin had been forced to recognise that Australia needed to look elsewhere to safeguard national security, and he began severing the psychological as well as the economic ties which bound Australia and England. This recasting of national allegiances was soon replicated in the cultural world as well as that of foreign policy and political expediency, as under the influx of 250,000 American servicemen stationed in Australia during the war, Australians began to gravitate away from the strongly rural-oriented, Empire-influenced ideology that had dominated their constructions of national identity in the past towards a strongly urbanised culture infiltrated by American influences. The American wartime forces were part of a vanguard heralding this cultural revolution, and postwar regeneration was characterised by the increasing influence and later escalation of American consumer products, particularly American mass culture and youth popular culture. Moreover the 'teenage' phenomenon - the term and concept themselves deriving initially from the United States - meant that Australian adolescents with more money and leisure time to devote to entertainments than at any other time in Australia's history were increasingly liberated from the 'stuffiness' of British culture endorsed by the ABC and highbrow entertainments like the theatre, ballet and the opera. They were lured instead by the irresistible lowbrow appeal of Hollywood movies, especially James Dean's *Rebel Without A Cause*

and Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* (both of which were released in Australia in 1955), as well as the exciting new sound of rock and roll which was ushered in after the American fashion by radio disc jockeys endlessly playing Top 40 hits. The impact and assimilation of images of America and American popular culture was in fact so pronounced that Australian reporters warned that Australian teenagers' acceptance of American ways of dressing, dancing, food and slang language was making them misunderstood - presumably by their elders - within their own country (Stratton 1992, p.95).

Meanwhile other forces were at work busily revitalising and redefining Australia's cultural identity. Literary and cultural historians like Vance Palmer, A. A. Phillips and Russel Ward were attempting to revive the flames of literary nationalism by elevating and eulogising the male-dominated radical nationalist tradition of the 1890s in an attempt to dislodge the infamous 'cultural cringe' which seemed more manifest in the English departments of Australian universities than anywhere else (for instance, in 1945 Professor J.I.M. Stewart gave one of the pioneering Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures on D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* because 'there is no Australian literature I can find to write about') (Harris, in Coleman 1962, p.49). Inspired by a need to encourage and evangelise Australian writing, these critics looked to a halcyon past for their eloquent and partisan accounts of the formulation of the Australian realistic tradition, and the special place within this of the Australian bushman - a figure which was once a specifically rural identity, but was then, with quite breathtaking audacity, foisted upon the rest of the population and termed the 'typical Australian'. This obsession with male mythologising and national character building was not confined to academia, however, as Australian popular literature of the time certainly stressed the frontier image of the sunbronzed Australian as bushman or laconic wartime hero, concentrating upon and cultivating the 'national' virtues of lusty self-reliance and mateship, together with an inbred distrust of pretension, snobbery and authority. This Australian male 'type' appears in a highly aggrandised form in novels such as D'Arcy Niland's *The Shiralee* (1955), Neville Shute's *A Town Like Alice* (1957), and a clutch of texts by authors such as Jon

Cleary, Eric Lambert and R.S. Porteous. It is precisely in both this 'high' push for cultural autonomy, as well as in popular writing, that the definitively 'Australian' literary tradition may be seen as a reflection of a growing sense of 'Australianness'.

Given that Australia in the 1950s was undergoing this highly complex and interactive process of cultural renegotiation, I was interested to look at children's books published in this decade, eager to discover what sorts of messages were being disseminated to readers about Australian identity (that is, was Australia a cultural colony of England, or, increasingly, America, or had it attained some definition of national sovereignty?). While I was particularly concerned to examine the figure of the English migrant and the ideological baggage bound up with that figure, it seemed appropriate first of all to look at 'serial' English novels which happened to be set in this country. And the most striking thing about W.E. Johns' *Biggles in Australia*, which was published in 1955, is the extraordinary stereotyping of nations and races mixed with the standard Cold War rhetoric of the times: Biggles, Ginger, monocled Bertie and Algy travel to Australia because 'Australia is part of the British Commonwealth' (p.14), and is a 'fast developing continent in which the Iron Curtain brigade would like to get their teeth' (p.15). The villains, led by Erich von Stalheim, Biggles' arch enemy, are ex-Nazis and now 'red-hot' Communist agitators 'of the loud-mouthed type' (p.59), first pictured 'in tropical kit, creased, dirty, shrunken and generally disreputable. They were hatless, and all needed a hair-cut and a shave' (p.9). The Communists have been involved in the 'dirty business' of 'telling the natives that white men are a lot of thieves who have swindled them out of their land, and turned them into slaves' (p.97), and are intent upon stirring the natives into Mau Mau like rebellions while they themselves send vital information back to the U.S.S.R. about the new rocket and guided missile ranges and Australia's newly discovered uranium deposits.

In a world which is thus defined in terms of binary oppositions, there are two kinds of Australian men (women are virtually non-existent) – 'good' whites and 'bad' blacks. Biggles visits a North West corner of the country

that 'used to be called the triangle of death on account of the ferocity of the natives. Even today, with native reserves and all that sort of thing, they're not to be trusted' (p.92). When told of the death of a prospector who had maintained a friendly relationship with the blacks, Biggles comments 'that cuts no ice with blacks when the savage inside 'em bursts through the thin skin of the apparent friendliness they pick up from contact with whites' (p.102), and continues: 'If I know anything about natives, that bunch is all keyed up to jump. They themselves, with their animal brains, don't know yet which way they'll go' (p.104). This is authenticated later on, as in a crisis the blacks are riveted to the spot: 'they stood their ground, wide-eyed and open-mouthed as their primitive brains strove to keep pace with these unusual events' (p.123). On the other hand white Australians come from the opposite end of the evolutionary scale: they are good blokes, courageous, resolute, 'The Voice of Young Australia' (p.160), working with Biggles to rid the world of evil. It goes almost without saying that the few white villains are halfbreeds, or, as Johns rather primly puts it, 'of questionable ancestry' (p.118).

This novel would seem to verify an image of Australia as deferential colonial offspring, needing the manpower of the Mother Country to help it out of nasty scrapes. But what is also striking in the Biggles adventure story is that the Australia depicted there is solely seen in terms of the Bush or the Beach. This is perhaps seen most entertainingly when Biggles and Ginger get attacked by giant squids, an incident which gives rise to a very British piece of understatement:

*'I shall think twice before I try sleeping on any more beaches in this part of the world,' said Ginger, warmly.*

*'It looks as if we shall have to swot up our natural history before we start on any more jaunts of this sort,' averred Biggles.*

(pp.38-9)

It seems that for overseas writers the Outback was yet to be replaced iconically by the City, as the symbol of Australia - notably of course Sydney, with its Harbour Bridge and (as yet unbuilt) Opera House. And so in a

similar fashion when the intrepid English heroine Sally Baxter, Girl Reporter, visits the country she too immediately travels into the Bush (she is accompanying some English Young Farmers studying agricultural methods Down Under), and she is also menaced by marauding Aborigines (but in her case their mood changes into adulation and they worship her when she finds a sacred cave for them) (Edwards 1960).

But the conflating of Australia and Country is not only reduced to English writers straining for local colour. Novels written by Australians themselves also rely heavily on this truism in texts clearly geared towards British audiences made up of potential migrant material. Despite the huge suburban sprawl which characterised Australian real estate developments in the 1950s, and to which most migrants naturally gravitated, Australia, as it appears in the children's books, is synonymous with Bush life. Allan Aldous's exceptionally rosy picture of Australian life, *The New Australians* which was published in 1956, is typical of this trend. As young migrant Gerry Gail learns from his older brother Bob:

*'There are miserable people in this country today, of course. You'll find plenty of them in the cities. They're miserable because they don't know what they want. They get good wages. They buy things that would have made the pioneers' eyes pop right out of their heads with amazement, and they take them all for granted: their radios, their refrigerators, their washing machines and all their other gadgets.'*

(p.56).

In this simplified vision of the world it soon becomes logical that the cities breed bogdies and other undesirable types:

*... their faces were pale and thin, their hair long. They wore ridiculously long jackets and trousers that tapered to the ankles. There was something evil in the way they regarded him.*

(p.92)

These men are the lowest of the low; in terms redolent of Social Darwinism they are 'mangy dingoes' (p.94), 'brave

as lions when there are enough of them. But they're all yellow as mustard underneath' (p.95). These 'rats' 'don't usually pick on young men - not when there's only three to one at any rate. They usually like to bash old people' (p.95). Only slightly higher up the evolutionary chain are the railway porters with whom Gerry first works when he arrives in Australia:

*Most of his fellow porters - the junior ones, at any rate - were not his type. He hardly expected them to be. But that was not a snobbish attitude. He himself had some interests that demanded a certain amount of intelligence and application, and he had done fairly well for himself at school. The other lads were mainly those who through laziness or inability had not prepared themselves for the skilled trades or the professions.*

(p.89).

Gerry finds that he has no companionship with young men from the city, and that genuine companionship exists only in the Bush, where people are Australians in their 'very flesh and bones' (p.161). One of Gerry's friends reiterates this lesson:

*...you just don't know Australia until you know the bush. The trouble is there's not enough people really getting to grips with the bush. It's what gives our country its own particular flavour. But most people live in the cities and never really get to know the bush. And so they just take in a lot of imported books and films and comic strips and stories and things.*

*...The old Australianism is dying out. I reckon it's up to us younger ones to keep it alive. Gerry reflected that if he was going to be a real Australian he must get to know the bush.*

(p.116)

In keeping with this ideology and the old-fashioned Bush/City dichotomy which reverberates throughout the text, Aldous valorises and romanticises Bush bred men. Even Gerry's older brother Bob, a successful migrant who has returned to England in order to sponsor his newly widowed mother, brother and sister, has absorbed

some of these attributes. He appears 'bronzed' and carries himself with 'proud bearing and plenty of assurance'(p.10), as he has spent the last few years working with other settlers in the Ninety Mile Desert, attempting to carve an improbable oasis out of the wilderness and helping to create a class of British-style yeomanry in the Australian Bush. Naturally Bob idolises his neighbour Stan, a stereotyped Australian:

*Stan stood over six feet high, was very broad across the shoulders....His face was...tanned a mahogany shade by the sun..... And a fine, humorous face it was, too, the lines that came when he smiled remaining there even when his expression was serious, which suggested that he must do a great deal of smiling to fix them there so firmly. His eyes were heavily lidded, nature's protection from the glaring sun, but their blueness looked out on the world as though it were a wonderful place indeed.*

(p.59)

Moreover idealised Stan is no yokel; his bookshelves are groaning with expensive art books, modern novels and volumes of modern verse, as Aldous proves that the pioneer men settling in the Bush are not only hard workers, but cultivated as well.

The dwellers in the Desert are goodwilled and friendly. Gerry moves uneasily among them, unsure of himself and aware that but for his brother's intervention he would be heading stolidly for the safe and comfortable job that his father had had before him in a local firm in London. His sense of inferiority appears confirmed when he causes an accident with a runaway tractor; as one of the less charitable men remarks, 'What else could you expect from a pommy... You wouldn't catch an Australian kid doing his nut like that' (To which Stan improbably replies, 'I don't like that word "Pommy". I thought it had disappeared from the language. Just remember that my best friend is an Englishman') (p.70). The rest of the novel deals with Gerry's struggle to prove his manhood, to become a real Australian able to do 'a man's work among men' (p.71). He has to demonstrate that he is the right kind of man to seize the opportunities offered in the

country, that he comes from good enough stock to succeed in this brave new world.

It is obvious that Gerry's maturation into a *real* Australian has to take place in the Bush. Firstly, on a weekend trip into the country, he rescues his friend from a snake and manages to negotiate the hostile environment alone, bringing back help for his injured friend. Then, in a test that demonstrates that he is no longer a city weakling, he manages to rescue his sister Jo and Stan, who have been honeymooning at Ayers Rock:

He himself wanted to take a trip out to Ayers Rock one day, but his reason was not the reason of the curious tourist.

*The Rock was part of the great country he had taken to his heart. He wanted to know every part of it. Even the desert had a strange beauty and an immensity and a brooding silence and solitude that did things to the heart of a true Australian, even though it might appal and depress the stranger with its horizon-wide monotony.*

(p.158-9)

After saving the lives of Stan and Jo, and having displayed considerable knowledge of bushlore in doing so, Gerry at last feels like he belongs in Australia:

*He had grappled with it at close quarters and in its most primitive aspects, and he had conquered its terrors and, at the same time, his own physical fears.*

*From now on he could love the country, knowing it so well that he could recognise its dangers and ward them off.*

(p.179)

*The New Australians* abundantly demonstrates that Australia is a man's country, providing that he is a certain kind of man, adventurous, courageous, prepared to take a chance. While there is none of the bigotry evident towards the Aborigines that is to be found in the Biggles story, for example, black men are simply erased from this particular version of Australia. That Australia is an appropriate home only for middle-class white people is,

however, indicated early in the novel, when Gerry and his family visit the Middle East on their way to Australia and are appalled by the menacing touts on the streets:

*'It's shocking,' Gerry said. 'I mean, all this poverty is one thing. But they don't seem to know what honesty and cleanliness and common decency are.'*

(p.38)

But it is made equally clear that women have no place in the real Australia either. They are unable to feel what men do for the Australian landscape, and to appreciate the quality of life in this country. Gerry's mother refuses to like Australia and stays only because she cannot afford to leave; she deserts the Bush for Melbourne life, taking Gerry with her into this no real man's land. She becomes obstinate and insults her neighbours, is bad-tempered and complaining:

*'You people here think you've got the earth. Let me tell you, you don't even know what real living is. You live in hovels with not a decent shop within a hundred miles and you have the effrontery to suggest you're so very superior. In England we've forgotten more about decent living than you Australians have ever learnt.'*

(pp.80-1).

Meanwhile Gerry begins to distance himself from her, seeking instead the company of mates:

*He felt somehow resentful of his mother's manner. Somehow it implied that he was still a boy. Well, that was true enough in a way. But he was growing up. He was earning wages which at home would have seemed a small fortune. And last night he had proven - above all to himself - that he could act with courage when necessary.*

(pp.107-8).

Eventually, and reluctantly, Gerry's mother agrees to stay, lured by activities like play reading groups and church teas. At least she does not descend into the 'Water Them Geraniums' mode of one other woman in the text, the 'thin, gaunt-looking woman' with a 'severe' face who

ministers to Gerry when he emerges from the first of his bush ordeals. Her 'harsh, mannish voice' (p.144) is clearly a result of living like the men in their environment; Mrs. Gail in her stylish Melbourne home will never do that. On the other hand Gerry's sister Jo decides to live in the bush with Stan, but although she is more accommodating than her mother she too is a marginalised figure in the text. It is signalled early on that she is expected to marry, and the only time when she becomes a real presence in the text is when she provides a home in the wilderness:

*'Stan and I ran down to Adelaide and chose a lot of furniture and furnishings. I haven't got the curtains up yet, and we're going to paint the interior with the walls in each room different colours. It looks so gay and lovely that way.'*

*...The house was beginning to look like a home. In the headlamps could be seen the tidy lawns that were already beginning to thicken, the flower beds and the shrubs.*

*'Stan and I have been working on the place for months,' Jo said proudly. 'Don't you think it's beginning to look nice?'*

*'Not beginning, dear. It is nice,' said Mrs. Gail. She could scarcely believe that such a home could be built in the midst of what, only seven years before, had been a desert wilderness. The interior of the house was heavy with the smell of fresh paint and new linoleum. There were paint pots everywhere, and scraps of cut linoleum lay around. There were also unopened parcels and a stack of unhung pictures in the living-room.*

(pp.153-4).

It is utterly in keeping with postwar expectations of women that Jo's destiny is to create a beautiful house. As Lee and Senyard have demonstrated, postwar girls were initiated into a fictional world dominated by middle-class virtues and middle-class goals. And so in 1950s novels girls appear briefly as teenagers prior to becoming mature women, fulfilled through their homes and families. Like her mother, who objected to the Bush lifestyle because of its lack of material comforts (the decent shops, the standard of living, and so on), Jo is portrayed as yet

another female consumer, dedicated to the securing of emotional happiness through material well-being.

Gender roles in *The New Australians* are quite typical of the times. Nourma Handford's novels about Queensland life, *Three Came From Britain* (1945) and *Cottontrees* (1948), show teenage migrant girls as objects of romance (in Handford's case they are chosen by appropriately middle-class men with glamorous sports cars). While her girls do not quite reach the stage where they are designing their dream home, they are avid consumers of cosmetics and clothes, their petty purchasing but a prelude to the buying power that lies before them. On the other hand Handford's migrant boys gravitate inexorably towards the Bush life, and in so doing prove that they are 'desirable' migrant material. In this world of segregated cultures, the boys tame the Great Outdoors while the girls set up house (for boys other than the protagonists, of course). As Richard Parker's *New Home South* (1961) also demonstrates, only boys can prove that they are 'just the right independent sort' to 'get on all right in Australia' (p.119) and become 'dinkum Aussies' (p.127).

Australian children's novels from the 1950s featuring English migrants show distinct trends. Firstly, there is little of the deference towards England and English culture that might have been expected given the English oriented bias in Australian schools and the rapture with which Queen Elizabeth was greeted. Novels written by Australians are, like most of the novels written for adults and the writings of the cultural historians, overwhelmingly nationalistic, assimilationist and proud of Australia's future and potential. Moreover, while the American cultural influence is not particularly overt, it is present most fully in the picture of the adolescent migrant girl with her romantic inscriptions and her goal of the Australian/American dream home. Migrant boys, however, resist American city-minded lifestyles - 'the radios, refrigerators, washing machines and all their other gadgets', and revert to the Bush life, embracing 'the old Australianism' in the face of huge changes in Australia's social and cultural demography. Men and boys seem to identify with an idealised past, while women (and undesirable men) are associated with an Americanised future. That the 1950s was 'a man's decade'

(Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath, Quartly 1993, p.274) is almost universally acknowledged - it is also semiotically implicit in the image of the 'lusty youth' about to take on the world. The message emanating from Australian books of this decade appears to be that *real or true* Australians are males living in the Bush. The fervently nationalistic male bravado of the times is perhaps most fully realised in the nation's most popular adult book of the decade, Nino Culotta's *They're A Weird Mob* (1957), which was reprinted thirteen times in its second year of publication. This novel, which also takes as its theme a migrant's induction into Australian life, finishes with Nino recognising that Australia is really God's Own Country, and that God is the biggest Ocker of them all:

*There are hundreds of ways we could spend this sunny Sunday afternoon. Or we could just stay at home and do nothing, and perhaps that would be best of all. To rest on the seventh day. To thank God for letting us be here. To thank Him for letting me be an Australian. Sometimes I think that if I am ever fortunate enough to reach Heaven, I will know I am there when I hear him say, 'Howyergoin' mate, orright?'*

(p.205).

It appears as if children's literature would shout 'Amen' to that.

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