



## Literature, Mythmaking and National Identity: the Case for *Seven Little Australians*

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In an important article entitled 'Cultural studies, new historicism and children's literature', Tony Watkins argues that myths of national identity are woven into children's literature (Watkins, 1992). He alleges that *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Wizard of Oz* represent different national responses to *fin de siècle* changes in English and American society, and in particular to the development of industrialization and technology, and the concurrent changes in the relations between the social classes. According to Watkins, *The Wizard of Oz* is a quintessentially American text in that it presents a vision of a utopian society which is progressive, oriented to the future, and which is part technology and part pastoral (that is, in the kingdom of Oz which merges the industrialized world with the realm of nature). Because the great and powerful wizard turns out to be a common man from Omaha, and Dorothy, the ordinary girl from Kansas, is given a central role and allowed to act as an intrepid pioneer adventurer, while the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman and the Cowardly Lion all find that they have powers that they had not realised they possessed, Watkins sees *The Wizard of Oz* as encompassing elements of the American national myth in which America is a place of progress where ordinary people - provided

they learn to be self-reliant - can prosper.

On the other hand, according to Watkins' analysis, the supremely English *The Wind in the Willows* represents a widespread nostalgia on the part of the professional middle classes for a lost rural arcadia, an unchanging England uninfluenced by contemporary events such as the agricultural depression and social unrest in the cities, together with the concurrently alarming changes to the traditional social hierarchy. The text consequently reveals myths of English national identity which are essentially backward-looking, embracing an idyllic past of a static, rural, non-industrial, properly hierarchical society in secure, thatched-cottaged surroundings situated somewhere in the South of England. This is a place where animals learn, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, that true wisdom lies in accepting one's 'home', or, in this particular instance, one's place in the class structure. 'Home' for Toad, Ratty and Mole is linked with order, tranquillity and harmony - values which many, including Kenneth Grahame, felt were being destroyed by industrial progress (symbolised in this novel by the stoats, weasels and ferrets from the Wild Wood attempting to take over Toad Hall). Moreover, contrary to *The Wizard of Oz*, this is a society in which women are either absent or relegated to subsidiary roles like the gaoler's

daughter or the bargewoman. Indeed the strongest emotion in the novel is that of male comradeship, something which Watkins allies with the male-oriented English public school system operating in Grahame's time. In this idealised version of a pre-lapsarian England, women certainly know their place.

Watkins' argument about these contrasting myths of national identity and their place in children's literature is a persuasive one. While it goes almost without saying that extraliterary cultural formations shape literary discourse, this is also supplemented by the fact that much children's literature is imbued with the notion that children and young adults can be 'moulded' into adults of desired ideological orientation or social conditioning. From the beginnings of children's literature onwards, children's novels have, in the main, been heavily pedagogical and riddled with the moralism and values of their times. Clearly novels can operate as powerful shapers of children's imaginations and can transmit, consciously or otherwise, myth-like messages about national identity. As Richard Slotkin has observed:

*Through myths the psychology and world view of our cultural ancestors are transmitted to modern descendants, in such a way and with such power that our*

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*perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly...affected.*  
(cited in Watkins 1992, p.185)

Using Watkins' work as a reference point and base, I should like to examine a text published in Australia in the 1890s - that is, at the same time as *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Wind in the Willows* - in order to examine how this text constructs national identity, and, more particularly, how gender plays a crucial role in the mythologising process.

When Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* was first published in 1894, it created a literary sensation. The Australian edition sold out in seven weeks, and it was reprinted every year for the next twenty years. It has never been out of print, and has spawned radio plays, an ABC television series in 1974 (when the Whitlam government inspired a renaissance in all types of Australian cultural production), and even a musical. *Seven Little Australians* is probably Australia's best-known children's story - for instance, in a survey in 1980 Geoffrey Dutton found that while most adult Australians had read little Australian literature, they had read Australian children's books, notably those of Ethel Turner and her rival, Mary Grant Bruce (Dutton 1984, pp.48-9).

*Seven Little Australians* is very much a product of its time and place. Like England and America,

Australia in the 1890s was undergoing a severe agricultural depression, while technology was producing permanent changes in its social demography. More pertinently, however, there were some factors operating which were unique to this country, most notably the ferment of creative activity in the years leading up to Federation in 1901, with writers and intellectuals preoccupied with the future directions of the fledgling Australian nation, and the national debate being seasoned by contributions from utopian, socialist, racist and feminist frameworks of ideas. In particular the 1890s may be seen as marked by that aggressive literary nationalism which was promoted particularly by the *Sydney Bulletin*, which advocated republicanism and furthered anti-British feeling, at the same time promoting the superiority of the Australian bushman — that fabulous figment of myth which was manufactured by male writers otherwise anchored to Sydney suburbia, anxious wives, fractious children and mortgage commitments. The 'Bushman's Bible', with its idiosyncratic mix of iconoclastic cartoon humour, radical politics, misogyny and racism, provided the starting point for Ethel Turner's literary career. The *Bulletin's* Literary Editor, A. G. Stephens, was Turner's mentor, and he placed her as one of the leading figures in Australia's literary birth, alongside Henry Lawson and 'the

Banjo', announcing 'Only one (other) Australian author since Marcus Clarke - Henry Lawson - has had such moving emotional art' (cited in White 1988, p.53). There is little doubt that Turner was heavily influenced by the *Bulletin's* ethos, especially since it had such a huge impact upon the production of Australian literature and in dictating the tastes of the Australian literary public - in other words, that typically nineteenth-century mix of adults and older children which comprised her target readership.

Prior to and contemporaneous with *Seven Little Australians*, Australian children's literature came predominantly from the United Kingdom. Stories set in Australia showed transplanted British children who showed pluck, dogged tenacity, and an unswerving, implicit belief in Britain's imperial destiny. Australian children behaved like stereotypical products of an English public school. In *Queensland Cousins*, for instance, which is supposedly set on a cane farm in Far North Queensland, the hero Eustace aspires to become a 'gentleman' and is appalled when, on a visit to England, someone asks if his family eats with the servants when they are in the colonies. He is equally disgusted when an ignorant English cousin declares that he has read in a book that there are no class distinctions in

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Australian life, and that men and women meet as equals:

*'Rot,' said Eustace briefly. 'I don't know how you could believe it. Our friends were all gentlemen and ladies. Australians are as particular as you are whom they have for friends.'*

(Haverfield 1908, p.197)

In an earlier episode, Eustace and his neighbour Bob, a token Australian bushman, are captured by hostile Aborigines and fear for their lives. In these circumstances even the recognisably larrikin bushman loses his cheekiness in order to speak and act like a caricatured upper-class Englishman. Aware that like all heathens these black men have no knowledge of mercy – 'They have no Great Example to follow like we have' – Bob turns to Eustace:

*'Buck up, old chap,' Bob said softly; 'One can only die once. Let's show these black-fellows how a Christian and an Englishman can do it. You'll get the strength right enough; I'm not a bit afraid of your funkung.'*  
(p.149)

The typical colonial children's novel is also sharply gender-differentiated. Colonial girls are denied access to the boys' life-threatening but sinew-enhancing dramas, and have a very low profile in these romanticised valorisations of the exploits of

juvenile empire-builders. They are not questers, and have no thorny road to womanhood comparable to, say, Eustace's path to manly self-definition. They remain indoors in almost purdah-like confinement, kept there by their male kin, fearful of their defilement by other, lesser races. Their destiny lies in their biology, as future receptacles for further generations of sturdy Anglo-Saxon stock, while their husbands carve a future out of the wilderness. And so colonial girls customarily get the short straw: they reveal that to be born female is to be born into a world which demands submission, passivity and dependency. In *Queensland Cousins*, moreover, the children, with Bob in tow, eventually return to England for good. They are last seen in their ancestral manor house, surrounded by loyal forelock-tugging family retainers: 'The great house, standing grey, massive and strong in the evening light', makes the children's hearts thrill with pride, for 'This was something better than their own slenderly-built, iron-roofed house in Queensland' (p. 202). Their heritage intact, Australia for these Queensland cousins recedes into little more than an exotic memory. It is certainly never 'home', just as they are never Australians, much less Queenslanders.

At first glance, then, *Seven Little Australians* appears to be

diametrically opposed to the colonial novels which preceded and paralleled it. Turner was inspired by the *Bulletin's* ethos of ardent Australianness, and an identically aggressive nationalism/patriotism is apparent in her famous disclaimer on the first page of *Seven Little Australians* that children born in Australia, unlike those born in England, are ever perfect:

*It may be that the miasmas of naughtiness develop best in the sunny brilliancy of our atmosphere. It may be that the land and the people are young-hearted together, and the children's spirits not crushed and saddened by the shadow of long years' sorrowful history. There is a lurking spectacle of joyousness and rebellion and mischief in nature here, and therefore in children,... the spirited, single-hearted, loyal ones who alone can 'advance Australia'.*  
(Turner 1894, pp.7-8).

Turner's coupling of the land and the people is in keeping with the nationalist discourse of the time, in which Australia was regularly presented as a 'young' country, immature but vital, eagerly awaiting a future without the strictures enforced by the 'mother' country. In her novel there is more than a generation gap dividing Captain Woolcot, English-born and educated at Rugby Public School, and his

unruly Australian offspring. Captain Woolcot personifies the rigid world of the English middle class: he endorses the values of correct etiquette, children who are preferably neither seen nor heard, and the imposition of discipline and plenty of it. His cultural outlook is literally worlds apart from that of his children, who are emblematic of the exuberant, informal country of their birth, happy inhabitants of the lawless house known as 'Misrule'. Whereas the New World children bond affectionately with each other, they have a dutiful but distant relationship with their Old World father, who is remote, unsympathetic, and preoccupied with his own interests and pleasures. When he sends the children off to their step-mother's parents' property at Yarrahappini, for instance, he suddenly assumes 'a jaunty air as if the prospect of two months' bachelordom was not without its redeeming points' (p. 136). Turner makes it clear that the seven little Australians bring themselves up; their father intrudes upon their freedom only intermittently to reprimand, chastise or beat them, while their sweetly ineffectual stepmother Esther, the mother of the youngest of the seven, is barely older than they are. These children are indomitable, and it takes more than one hapless parent to fence them in.

In a collective fashion, as Kerry

White has argued, the seven little Australians represent the joyous opportunities for life in Australia, and the novel encapsulates the hopes, dreams, uncertainties and fears of an unformed nation prior to Federation (White 1993, p.75). Perhaps these uncertainties and fears are mirrored most closely in the figure of Judy, the lively and extroverted instigator of all the family scrapes, the one child who is contemptuous of authority and consequently most troubles her father:

*Judy always mystified him. He understood her the least of all his children, and sometimes the thought of her worried him. At present she was only a sharp, clever, and frequently impertinent child; but he felt that she was utterly different from the other six, and it gave him an aggrieved kind of feeling when he thought about it, which was not very often.*

*...That restless fire of hers that shone out of her dancing eyes, and glowed scarlet on her cheeks in excitement, and lent amazing energy and activity to her young, lithe body, would either make a noble, daring, brilliant woman of her, or else she would be shipwrecked on rocks the others would never come to, and it would flame up higher and higher and consume her.*  
(p.28)

Towards the end of the novel, Judy, brimful of promise and life,

is felled by a gumtree while saving the life of her smallest brother. In one sense Judy's death is one of the great set-pieces of Victorian writing, catering to established tastes for sentimentality and melodrama. Turner herself was quite cheerful about it all - 'killed Judy to slow music', she wrote in her diary on October 18, 1893 (Poole 1980, p.98). She certainly contrived an effective death scene, with the obligatory references to Judy rejoining her dead mother, the final prayers being said in a quavering voice by her older sister Meg, and Judy's last, lingering look at her soulmate and favourite brother, Pip. But there are significant differences from the usual scenario - in *Little Women*, for instance (a work upon which *Seven Little Australians* is quite closely based, with Turner even being promoted as 'the Australian Alcott'), good, angelic Beth resignedly departs the world in a pious, self-effacing manner. In contrast Judy hogs the limelight, refuses to leave, and in her own characteristic way fights off the blandishments of death for as long as she can.

Why, then, does Judy die? Judy can be portrayed as a victim of a patriarchal society which ultimately punishes her (in the strictest possible way, it has to be said) for her unconventionality, her wilful disregard for the niceties of the traditional female

role, her refusal to be typecast as a submissive female, forever following in the lead of her wiser, protective, brothers. Indeed, her position at the centre of the Woolcot family is then superseded by 'Little Mother Meg', who has learnt through suffering, and particularly by witnessing her headstrong sister's death, to be more mature, gentler, and purer (in short, she becomes something of a martyr, with the typically Victorian air of other-worldly, self-sacrificing resignation). Actually Meg has learnt to be a perfect lady, in the Ruskin-like terms appropriate to nineteenth-century discourse. And so, in the course of time, Meg becomes an ethereal angel-wife, a caring, nurturing force in the correct domestic realm, maintaining her own family unit and keeping it happy and harmonious.

Yet there are some problems with this otherwise persuasive analysis. For Judy's 'indomitable spirit and pluck' is certainly in keeping with a specifically 'Australian type' of girl which was much celebrated in pre- and post-Federation times, and whose chief virtue lay in the fact that she was anything but a replica of her English counterpart. According to many contemporary writers and journalists, the enviable climate ensured that the Australian girl enjoyed a much freer life than girls elsewhere, and as a

consequence she was more resourceful and lively. Judy is a literary embodiment of what journalists, in particular, were lauding as the most wholesome and splendid companion in the world – even, at times, a kind of surrogate mate; in the words of one enthusiast, 'a really good pal' (Garth 1908, p.1006). According to the nationalist discourse of the period, which was then inextricably intertwined with notions of racial identity, this happy, hearty, and wholesome girl inevitably became the nation's hope for the future, the superb wife and mother of tomorrow, a glowing advertisement for White Australia. Consequently the girl 'whose qualities render her so eminently companionable from a masculine point of view' proves to be also 'an ideal mother from a nursery point of view - and here nursery and nationality are interchangeable terms' (p.1007). The same author was blunter elsewhere, when he noted that the Australian girl 'almost inevitably makes a good housewife. Whatever the army of dyspeptic husbands who may choose to deny it, there are more girls per thousand in Australia who can cook an eatable meal than in any other English-speaking country' (p.1009).

Certainly the special childhood freedoms deemed the privilege of all Australian children, regardless of their gender, stand in

heightened and ironic contrast to the restrictions which inhibited the nation's women. Yet some deft authors, Mary Grant Bruce included, managed to transform their tomboyish heroines into exceptional wife and mother material (and after all, years before, Louisa May Alcott did the same thing with Jo March, proving that biology will always win out over brains). More probably, perhaps, Judy is ousted because girls only have a limited time to share the nationalist space with their brothers. Nationalist discourse in the 1890s, as Susan Sheridan (1995) and Marilyn Lake (1986) have both shown, was controlled by the men, and the women were relegated to marginal positions within it. Significantly it is at Esther's parents' property in the bush (the 'real' Australia) where Judy's brother Pip comes into his own. In this, the key nationalistic 'centre' of the novel, Judy is not allowed, despite her pleadings, to participate in the campdrafting, but Pip does so:

*...clad in a crimean shirt and a pair of old serge trousers fastened around the waist with a leather belt, in which an unsheathed bowie knife, freshly sharpened, was jauntily stuck. No persuasions would induce him either to wear a coat or sheath the knife.*

(p. 155)

As he leaves, he shouts, 'Hurrah,

Fizz!...What 'ud you give to change places? (p.155), and upon his return he signifies their future roles in life. He will become a stockman, and Judy will be relegated to the sidelines, becoming his aide-de-camp, 'provided he let her stay in the saddle, and provided her with a whip just as long as his own' (p.159). It is now clear that Judy cannot contest the nationalist arena with her brother; and that from puberty onwards she must be content to play second fiddle. Already weakened from her previous exposure to the bush (when she walked seventy miles home from the boarding school where she had been sent by her exasperated father), Judy's end proves conclusively that the bush is no place for a woman. In keeping with the tradition of women being imprisoned in the bush (Judy's grave is on the station), Turner echoes the ideology of so many other nineteenth-century writers, who routinely depicted women as being physically trapped in their rooms, attics or their father's or husband's houses, as if their very femininity is sanctioned by their incarceration in their future 'realm'. These metaphorical indications of women's physical, economic and emotional imprisonment which are such a striking feature of adult radical-nationalist writers of the 1890s such as Barbara Baynton ('Squeaker's Mate' and 'The Chosen Vessel') and Henry

Lawson ('The Drover's Wife') are also found in Turner's discourse. The bush offers unqualified freedom to the men, but not, ultimately, to women (especially those otherwise decked out in masculine attire).

Moreover, it is instructive to note that while A. G. Stephens, literary lion and preserver of the masculinist tradition in Australian writing, was lavish in his praise of *Seven Little Australians*, a text in which maverick women are punished for overstepping the boundaries of the *Bulletin's* separate male and female cultures, he was far less effusive when Turner turned her pen to more adult themes, and to analyses about the relationships between men and women in particular. He apparently preferred Turner to 'prattle...pleasantly' (cited in White 1988, p.53) in a charmingly girlish manner in her correct sphere of children's writing, rather than observe married life. Her promotion of an alternative image of masculinity, that of Domestic Man, partial to home and hearth, which was diametrically opposed to the *Bulletin's* own preferred model, the Bushman, who regarded domestic life as a burden, a drag on his spirit and independence, was clearly her undoing. Sadly, it has been alleged that the *Bulletin's* savaging of her work, whenever she strayed from her circumscribed area, forced Turner

into keeping with children's literature, even though she privately declared it worthless: 'Never think that flagrant pile of rubbish books lying about the continent is in the least my "something": they have just been bread and butter', she once announced at a particularly jaundiced moment (White 1988, p.51).

And so, although *Seven Little Australians* seems at first sight to be a very different novel from the colonial ones which it supplanted, the message concerning gender ends up as very much the same. Like the colonial novels, nationalist children's stories are also orientated around a desire to enhance the continuation of certain values for the ultimate goal of racial preservation. The brave new world of the Australian Commonwealth is to be inherited by the boys, and the girls are at best still confined to the verandahs. Nationalist priorities and associated myth-making meant the eventual glorification of male cultural heroes, and over-reaching women are noble failures, shipwrecked on the rocks that the others will never come to. And, as Turner's case reveals, this is identical to the manner in which women writers were also forced to adhere to rules which dictated that they never veered into serious or adult fiction, but remained always on the margins as writers of light romantic novels

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or children's stories. *Seven Little Australians* is not forward-looking like *The Wizard of Oz*, nor backward-looking like *The Wind in the Willows*; its myth-making centres it very much in the misogynistic literary world of its time. In the end, female characters, like their creators, are put back firmly into their place.



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