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Fairies in the bush: The emergence of a national identity in Australian fairy tales

Abstract:

The outpouring of national sentiment as the colonies moved towards Federation heralded a quest for the ‘Australianising’ of children’s books: fairy tales were no exception. European fairy folk were placed in, or perhaps transported to, bush settings as authors re-imagined the ways in which the emigrant old-world creatures could claim a place in the Australian environment. This paper explores efforts of the early writers to locate an Australian fairyland in the ‘bush’ and contribute to the transmission of national identity.

Biographical note:

Robyn Kellock Floyd is a school principal and sessional lecturer in education at Swinburne University of Technology. She researches early Australian children’s literature and has presented aspects of her PhD research into early Australian fairy tales in Australia and Germany. Her educational publications include journal articles, curriculum materials and programs, and more recently Robyn has developed website resources for the new Victorian Curriculum (VCAA). She has also published short stories and a children’s book, *Nail boy* (2005). Robyn was awarded National ICT Teacher of the Year (2008) for her work developing bilingual short stories (Auslan/English) in a digital format.

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And why not fairies in Australia? Why should not our innumerable ferny glades, romantic valleys, mountainous passes, and lonesome glens, be peopled with fays and elves? Why should not Robin Goodfellow be found sitting jauntily astride the gorgeous waratah, or chasing the laughing jackass from its favourite bough? But all in good time. In the generations yet to come, unless the State schools make the little ones too learned, we shall have Australian fairy tales, stories in which goblin, kangaroos and emus, graceful sprites, and bearded magicians, will be found on every Fairyland in Australia. ('Fairyland in Australia' 1880: 3)

The Australian fairy tales that emerged in children's literature from the 1870s, as the colonies moved towards Federation, were firmly planted in the Australian landscape and contributed to the development of an authentic Australian voice in children's literature. The utilisation of the Australian bush setting as a backdrop to the exploits of the imported fairy folk was seen by authors as a way to assert an Australian identity on fairy tales. As old-world fairy folk were imported into the colonies they found themselves placed in the Australian bush, intermingling with its unique native wildlife and flora. There was a strong belief by authors such as Ethel Pedley, Olga Ernst, J.M. Whitfeld and Beatrice Wilcken that it was the right of all children in the colonies, at least children with access to books, to have their own Australian fairies. Gumsucker¹ (1870) wrote in the foreword to *Rosalie's reward; or, The fairy treasure*:

Should this story be favourable [sic] received by the little folks for whom it is written it is the Author's intention to publish a series of Tales, so that the merry children of the fair South may revel in dreams of their own Fairy Lore.

Tatar (1992) argued that literary fairy tales reflect the time and place in which they are written, acting to socialise and moralise within each specific culture. Consequently, as unique as each new strain of fairy tales claims to be, each comes ensnared within the values and beliefs of the past from which oral and literary fairy tales evolved. By drawing upon aspects of the traditional fairy-tale genre, the fairy-tale writers adapted traditional motifs and enabled the introduced old world beings to tailor their behaviour to new situations, and acclimatise to the new environment. The emerging Australian fairy-tale genre reflected the beliefs and principles generated by the social, political and historical contexts of the time.

These early literary fairy tales came couched in European terms, complete with European ideas about beauty and behaviour as well as an allegiance to the traditional structure of the fairy tale. In traditional texts, the blending of social issues with values, beliefs and attitudes is the result of a two-way conversation between the traditional form, which comes with predetermined cultural and moral perspectives, and the author, who may choose to challenge the values of the social and political environment (Stephens & McCallum 1998). Written fairy tales also present the individual values of the writer, confirming the necessity to investigate authorial intent and socio-cultural background in order to contextualise an author's writing. Many of the first writers of Australian fairy tales, such as Charles Marson, Desda, Atha F. Westbury, E. Favenc, J.R. Lockyear and J.M. Whitfeld, were from British or Anglo-Australian cultural backgrounds and it is likely that they were already conversant with European fairy-tale models. Nevertheless, they each made a conscious effort to place fairy creatures in the

bush during this period of the dawning of a nationalistic pride created by Federation (Kociumbas 1997).

Australian national identity as represented in Australian literature emanated from a tradition with origins in the 1890s and reverberated with the themes of mateship, independence, resistance to authority and the contradictory and challenging aspects of life in the bush environment (Sarangi & Mishra 2006). The result was that the 'voice of the bush...equated with the voice of Australia' (Schaffer 1988: 28-29, 49). Schaffer (1988) also argued that this highlighted the contrast between the developing colonial culture back-dropped by a 'harsh' landscape complete with various challenges and opportunities, and the British parent culture, with memories of a countryside that was familiar and comfortable. If immigrants initially 'imported the European treasury' (Haase 2008: 188) of fairy-tale stock, the outpouring of national sentiment as the colonies moved towards Federation ensured that the bush-related fantasies for children that emerged embodied a nationalistic sentiment that indicated affection for and an attachment to the landscape (Finnis 1995). The list of fairy-tale books that were published during this period indicates that there was a significant concentration in the decade before Federation.

The first fairy tales judiciously identified themselves as 'Australian' by inserting words into their titles that heralded their difference from other fairy tales. They appeared in newspapers and children's books, with titles that included *Mr Bunyip; or Mary Somerville's ramble: An Australian story for children* (Lockyear 1891), *Australian fairy tales* (Westbury 1897), *The spirit of the bushfire and other Australian fairy tales*, (Whitfield 1898), *Australian wonderland: A fairy chain*, (A.A.B. and Helumac 1899) and *Dot and the kangaroo* (Pedley 1899). There were less than twelve books published between 1870 and 1910 but fairy tales also appeared in the children's sections of newspapers.

If early Australian children's writers had attempted to adapt the dominant English literary culture to the new landscape, the needs and wants of the changing demographic, with a steady flow of immigrants and Australian-born progeny, began to make an impact.

The taint of the convict era was diminished as opportunity and the chance of wealth enticed emigrants to the gold rushes and brought prosperity to the colonies. The need for land for agriculture impelled exploration into parts of the continent unknown to white colonists and fuelled conflict over land between small landowners and squatters as well as dispossessing Indigenous Australians from their traditional lands. Many of the early fairy tales reflect the social and cultural norms of the era and include references to alcoholism, the gold rushes, struggles to farm in a harsh and unforgiving landscape, poor treatment of Indigenous peoples and contemporary attitudes to death, women and education.

In children's books published after the gold rushes (from 1851) the tunneling goblins of European fairy tales emerge as magical miners in their new country. The prince or hero becomes a stocky country boy, stoic and resilient. Our princesses and Cinderellas wait to be rescued from poor mining families or failing settlers' selections. Their palaces are in the best residential areas of Melbourne and Sydney, Toorak or Vaucluse.

The bush became a dominant image in literature (Edelson 2010) as the familiar dark and forbidding forests of Western fairy tales were exchanged for equally demonised bush settings abounding with bunyips, snakes and the unknown. The ‘Bush’ also encouraged ‘accounts of wonders, fascinations, perils and pitfalls’ – some of them less than truthful and relying on the exotic to sensationalise (Finnis 1995: 52).

Contemporary newspaper reviews at the end of the nineteenth century indicated that the public was delighted with representations of fairies and elves in Australian settings and the contributions of the early fairy-tale writers to Australian fantasy are acknowledged briefly in Australian children’s literature references and scholarly papers (Lees & Macintyre 1993, Kociumbas 1997, Saxby 2002). However, the critical discourse about Australian fairy tales in the last two decades of the twentieth century was less than positive. Niall found the early Australian fantasies clumsy, and suggested that old world fairies frolicked unnaturally in the new world environment. She coined a potent description arguing that some attempts were simply ‘imported literary machinery with local labels’ and maintained that ‘gauzy wings and wands with gum leaves and wattle blossom did not work’ (1984: 190, 192). Butterss claimed that settling the fairies into an Australian way of life resulted in tales that were ‘uncomfortably alien’ (1995: 5). Their authenticity was questioned.

Literary critics suggested that the fairy tropes transported in the memories and literatures of the early white settlers and abruptly placed in the bush were impostors, and had no right to claim to be Australian fairies. More recently, Do Rozario analysed early Australian fairy tales and concluded that their descriptions clearly informed the reader of their ancestry and that, despite an attempt to distance themselves from their traditional fairylands, they continued to wear their ‘European diaphanous gowns and fashionable hair’ (2011: 14) retaining their old-world personas in their new lives.

Before 1850, Australia as a nation was just a geographic conception and a series of colonies connected through their British heritage (Blackton 1955). The most common religions, legal and moral codes and cultures came from one source: Britain. From this colonial perspective, children’s fiction encapsulated British culture and attitudes and served it wrapped in a garb of colonial bush imagery aimed at the middle and upper class children of officers, free settlers and government officials (Saxby 1995). In early Australian children’s books the images presented to readers are often of an Australian locale suffering from not being British. An early form of cultural cringe, our animals and surroundings needed to be explained to the audience before the narrative can proceed. A.A.B. and Helmulac explained that, ‘A laughing jackass is definitely not a jackass but a bird like a kingfisher’ (1899: 14). Home is commonly described in terms of a British, rather than an Australian, household. For example A.A.B & Helumac (1899), wrote about a platypus who has dreams of an English primrose, a ‘little flower from *Home*’ and the small boy who meets him does not challenge the platypus about his erroneous perspective (1899: 24 italics in original text). Other writers felt it was essential to explain colloquialisms, idioms and local phrases. When the old miner dies in *Rosalie’s reward; or The fairy treasure* some of the pathos from his deathbed scene is dissipated by the blunt explanation of the phrase, ‘Old Jack’s on his last shift’ added for those who may not understand that ‘Jack is dying’ (Gumsucker 1870: 11). Perhaps

this was included because of Gumsucker's awareness of the potential of a wider market, or to make it more appealing and exotic to readers.

Some fairy-tale writers aimed to direct the young colonials, commonly believed by some of their English cousins to be urchins and convict-stock, into a semi-cultured state. These writers compared the Australian child to the English character and suggested inferiority, particularly in the area of education. Charles Marson warned of the consequences for those schoolchildren who did not follow the expectations of the day such as playing favoured sports, being neat and being respectful to your elders. He introduced his character Tim Tomkins, to whom evil will eventually befall, by describing him as:

a grubby and greedy school boy, who never played football or cricket...or any game but marbles, and he cheated at marbles. He never bathed, either in the shower or sea unless he was forced, and he never took off his hat, even to a lady he knew. (Marson 1897: 28)

The belief that British children and adults were superior was not left unchallenged and often the newcomers' inability to adapt to the new climate was highlighted. The Australian youth, sturdy and resourceful, was regularly presented as more able than his English counterpart, who was portrayed as being unable to survive in the Australian landscape. In the newspaper serial *Three native bears: An Australian fairy tale* the reader is told that the newly arrived emigrant Arthur 'had a pink and white look and an air of innocence which at once proclaimed him a new chum' while his mentor Maurice York, who farms a small selection successfully, is described as the 'The taller of the two...one could see at a glance [he] was a colonial' (Children's Corner 1886: 212).

Similarly, while writers mirrored the structure of imported English fairy-tale books and the English translations of Grimms' Fairy Tales, there was often a clear attempt at differentiating the traditional and new world fairies. Nimon observed that, 'Children taken to the Australian colonies or born there were indeed Australian and were expected to be proud of the fact, but the colonies were first and foremost British, and their very existence was owed to their place in the British empire (2005: 2). However, by Federation, despite the commonality of their heritage, over three quarters of the population were Australian-born and it is not surprising that writers appear to have found it necessary to state the distinctions between Australian and European fairy folk.

As cultural identity in nineteenth century began to develop, some fairy-tale authors felt it necessary to reference the differences between British and Australian fairies. McGills argues that this was a result of the concern about, and focus on a desire for, 'Australianness' (2005: 78). The flow of the narrative was sometimes interrupted to advise readers that Australian fairies were different from their British kin. For example, in the fairy tale 'Elsie', Elsie asks the creature who appears in her room if it is a fairy. The fairy feels obliged to defend its stature and proclaim its position. The elf replies, 'Certainly child. Couldn't you see that? Australian elves are not so tall as our kindred over the ocean, but we are fairies not withstanding' (Westbury 1897: 158).

The significance of the natural environment remained a crucial element of the adventure story, the family story and fairy tales. Australian fairies needed to be quite different to their European counterparts. Seal described them as 'fairies in the paddock' (2014: 229)

arguing that the reality of bush life created the impetus for writers to adapt the delicate fairies of tradition. Particular skills and attitudes were essential for survival in an often unforgiving landscape, which is not perfect, as it is a less 'white' climate. Their appearance often reflected the challenges faced by the white settlers as well as representing features of the environment in which they lived.

The fairy king presented in *The storyteller: An Australian fairy tale* is a larrikin fairy, resourceful and independent:

[Katie] looked up and there sure enough, hanging by one hand to a rush-like branch, was a tiny human figure! Now if this figure had been at all like one of the fairies Katie had read about in the book, I suppose she would have greeted it almost as an old acquaintance, and would not have been at all startled. But the little stranger was a very different description to a fairy of the woods. He was of the colour of the dead grass, yet bright and shining; his yellow face was sparkling with mischief. On his head was a tiny, slouch, cabbage-tree hat. His feet and legs were encased in yellow boots. His upper garments were simply a shirt and trousers, and instead of the orthodox fairy wand he carried a tiny stockwhip. He hung firmly to the branch eyeing Katie quite impudently. She fairly started back some steps.

... 'I say little girl, does your mother know you're out?'

Katie could hardly believe her ears. A fairy talking in this slangy manner! The polite little people of fairy lore! She had often been advised to be like them when her own manners were not quite what her mother thought they should be. (Carneil 1896: 27)

The ethereal folds of traditional fairy garments have been discarded and both his dress and mannerisms are more suitable for living in the bush environment. Carneil makes sure that the reader knows that this fairy king is not at all like his European cousins. He is a bushman; his description reinforces the themes of struggle and survival on farms and in the outback experienced by new immigrants and farmers. He and his subjects have adapted to and thrive in the bush. This fairy king speaks slang, bets on the horse-fly races, has subjects who get 'euchred' after drinking eucalyptus juice, and thinks moonlight is washed-out.

Schaffer argued that the Australian voice was male and that therefore the Australian national character was also masculine (1988: 42). While the male fairy often embodied bushmanship and an eagerness to explore and conquer the bush, the actions and attire of many female fairies were influenced by the prejudices of historical fairy-tale structures. Versions of the feminine in this world are highly traditional, emphasising fairies' sweetness and delicacy, and locating them in settings where they perform decorative or nurturing roles (Bradford 2011).

Fairy-tale books (pre-1910), particularly those written by men, are peopled with male characters on quest-like adventures with very few female protagonists. Significantly, the fairies of the early Australian fairy tales written by women indicate there is a disparity in their descriptions. *Mollie's bunyip* (1904) is an example of the 'winsome, child-like creatures, often shown in profile, with flowing curls or 1920s bobs, ballet-style dresses and beautiful wings which would be perfectly at home on a butterfly' (Reeder 2010: 21) and Ernst's (1904) fairies are described as wearing 'filmy dresses'

(92) and as ‘beautiful little creatures, with pretty slender bodies and lovely golden hair, which as they floated about among the tress, gave them the appearance of golden balls’ (14). Nevertheless, Ernst’s fairies undertake adventuring roles in the bush without male support and make choices about their destiny. Likewise, the fairy queens created by Beatrice Wilcken are traditionally beautiful but emphasis is placed on their character traits such as wisdom, good judgement and curiosity.

Baker-Sperry and Grauerhloz suggested feminine beauty is seen as one of a female character’s most important assets in fairy tales, and that such messages are pervasive indicators of power and culture (2008: 145). Adding Australian symbols or representations of familiar objects to fairy attire reinforced the Australianness of the fairy. In the fairy tale, *True to the last! Or Aunt Milly’s Christmas box* (Wilson 1865), the fairy embodies traditional female beauty with her gold ringlets, fragility and snow-white arms untanned by the Australian sun. Though she wears a gauzy garment it is woven from Australian ocean surf, and elements that embellish her attire reinforce her position as an Australian fay; descriptions of her include references to the gold rushes, the Southern Cross star system and the churning waves of the Kiama Blowhole. She is described as:

a fairly fragile looking girl, whose limbs were most exquisitely proportioned, and whose features bore the impress of queenly beauty. The gold washed from the creeks of Australia was not brighter than the ringlets of this fair being; and they played about her snowy arms and shoulders until they fondled a waist zoned by a blue girdle, on the centre of which shone five dazzling stars – the Southern Cross of this sunny land! Her robe was formed of a gauzy texture, woven from the rainbow bubbles of the ocean surf. (Wilson 1865: 10)

Copying the time-honoured relationship between the traditional hero and the quest for a happy ending, Australia’s fairy creatures diligently undertook the role of the helper, as described by Davidson and Chaudri (2006: 99), intervening to assist the hapless hero at opportune moments. These Australian helpers ensured that challenges faced by those who were unfamiliar with life in the bush were resolved, guaranteeing the happily-ever-after ending. The fairies adapted their magic to the Australian environment and understood the challenges faced by the white settlers who often found adapting traditional European farming methods to the Australian environment difficult and intervened at opportune moments to assist the hapless hero. Often there was an adaptation or substitution of a fairy-tale element in an attempt to adjust the narrative for an Australian audience. For example Tim, the farmer, rescues a fairy that has been turned into a parrot. He is not given magic beans, or marriage to a princess, in return for his kindness but something more useful to an Australian farmer: magic words to make a bad-tempered cow into an excellent milker. Cocky tells Tim to ‘take the word of an Australian fairy that Peggy will stand as quiet as a mouse until you have drained her teats as dry as a corncob’ (Westbury 1897: 85). Other sprites can be more malicious, recognising threats to the livelihood of settlers and using them to make mischief and cause harm. Mukka ‘likes to drink the tanks dry while the station hands are asleep on hot nights’ (Marson 1891: 37).

Charles Marson offered children the opportunity to feel they belonged, exploring the

experience of being Australian by using images that identified elements of colonial life and discernible attitudes, rather than always placing his characters in a recognisable bush setting. There is a gentle humour in his *Faery stories*, where he suggests the magpies need a holiday from their wickedness, while the humour borne of Australian stoicism is reflected in the suggestion that the horrible goblin glue has a positive use: 'I must say it keeps the nap on shirts and coats and makes shirts white' (Marson 1891: 12).

Indigenous characters are largely absent in the new bush fairy-tale setting. There were some authors who chose to incorporate references to Indigenous traditions and culture and created plots in which Indigenous peoples were befriended, conquered or accommodated (Collins-Gearing 2006: 65). Examples of these included stories in *Australian fairy tales* (Westbury 1897), *Mr Bunyip* (Lockeyear 1899), *Fairy tales from the land of the wattle* (Ernst 1904) and *Fairy tales told in the bush* (Sister Agnes 1911). The presentation of Indigenous Australians in early children's literature was often shaped by prejudice and misinformation, and what was consequently considered offensive stereotyping. Lockeyear blends the wrongdoings of many white settlers into the one settler character, minimising the impact of the history of widespread brutality on the child reader, and further implying that such acts no longer occur. Mr Bunyip explains:

I have seen a great deal in my time. Indeed I have. The white settlers coming here, and some of them didn't treat the blacks so well, either. There was Peter Hardheart; the very first to take up a station in this neighbourhood; he used to shoot down the poor fellows as though they were wild beasts. They, and their people, had been in the habit for generations of catching Kangaroos, Opossums, Wallabys [*sic*], and other animals they ate, upon the land he occupied, and saw no harm in doing so still. But, he invented stories about their stealing his sheep and firing his fences and he shot them down wherever he saw them. (Lockeyear 1891: 12)

Although Lockeyear highlights the dispossession of the Indigenous peoples from traditional lands, he presents their cultural practices as 'habits', implying the need for change, and sees their practices of hunting and gathering as 'harmless', rather than necessary activities. Generally, within the context of Australian fairy tales, Aboriginal characters are largely seen through a white colonial lens, thereby highlighting the authors' racism, including their lack of understanding of the issues around dispossession and injustice, as well as a lack of spiritual insight.

The adaption of traditional motifs and the introduction of local characteristics and settings to imbue tales with an Australian essence that would resonate with their readership had varied success and depended, to an extent, on the imaginative ability of the writer (Saxby 1998). However, the localised perspective offered through early Australian fairy tales offered the Australian child an opportunity to question the notions of place and identity presented in books originating in Britain.

Rather than 'trite routine stories' as argued by Butterss (1995: 5) with the whiff of an Australian scent, these early fairy tales were a necessary step in the evolution of later Australian fantasies such as author/illustrator May Gibbs' gumnut babies and blossoms, bush creatures who have become icons and national symbols in Australian children's

literature (Walsh 2007, Hunt 2013). Bradford pointed out variances that made them less than traditional: they had wings but didn't fly; they treated animals as equals rather than place them in servitude, as did traditional fairies; their small-scale world replicated the social human world of the era whether they were watching a football match in a paddock or feeling anxious in the hurly burly of the Big Bad City (2011: 70, 72). There were fairy-tale motifs; the wicked Mrs. Snake assumed the role of the traditional evil creature aided by a tribe of villains, the Big Bad Banksia Men. Gibbs also claimed a bush identity for her imagined characters; they were hard workers, practical, and endeavoured to live in harmony with the bush and its creatures. Mulligan and Hill argue that Gibbs was responsible for the beginning of the magical genre to which *Blinky Bill* (Wall 1933) and *The magic pudding: the adventures of Bunyip Bluegum* (Lindsay 1918) belonged (2001: 84). Walsh argues that Gibbs was single-handedly responsible for the evolution of the earlier fairy tales from the standard fare of adapted old world characters and motifs in a response to the bush to a 'rich national mythology' (2007: 1). While Gibbs's gumnut characters and enchanting bush world is uniquely different from earlier Australian children's books, with their reliance on traditional fantasy beings, she carried on the task envisaged by earlier writers who were inspired to create identifiably Australian fairy tales.

The concept of Australian national identity reflected in these texts is hard to define as it is coloured by the literary histories, personal experiences and perspectives of each writer. Jose argues that while acknowledging that Australian literature can be defined by broad themes, one of which is landscape, it is also 'a mosaic of individual utterances' (2009: 2). The old-world fairy tales, once settled on Australian shores, were often modified by their authors; fuelled by the move towards the Federation of the colonies, the need to explain the differences in the environment and a growing admiration for the skills of bushmen. Flora, fauna and symbols that were recognisably Australian were commandeered in the quest to nationalise fairy tales and were one way through which to define an evolving construct of Australian identity for child readers.

Appendix: Selected Australian fairy-tale books (1870–1911)

- AAB & Helumac 1899 *Australian wonderland: A fairy chain* London: Ward
- Desda 1871 *The rival fairies, or, little Mamie's troubles: An Australian story for children* Sydney: Edward
- Ernst, O 1904 *Fairy tales from the land of the wattle* Melbourne: McCarron Bird
- Favenc, E 1900 *Tales for young Australia* Sydney: Empson & Son
- Green, HM 1892 *Clarence and the goblins, or, under the earth* Sydney: Public Library
- Gumsucker 1870 *Rosalie's reward, or, The fairy treasure* Ballarat: Wreford
- Lockyear, JR 1891 *'Mr. Bunyip', or, Mary Somerville's ramble: An Australian story for children* Melbourne: Spectator Publishing Co.
- Marson, CL 1891 *Faery stories* Adelaide: E.A. Petherick
- Pedley, E 1899 *Dot and the kangaroo* London: Tomas Burleigh
- Rentoul, AR & Rentoul, IA 1904 *Mollie's bunyip* Melbourne: Robert Jolley,
- Sister Agnes 1911 *Fairy tales told in the bush* London: Elliot Stock

Westbury, A 1897 *Australian fairy tales* London: Ward, Lock & Co.

Whitfield, JM 1898 *The spirit of the bush fire: And other Australian fairy tales* Sydney: Angus & Robertson

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Notes

1. Believed to be a pseudonym for Sarah Anne Charlotte Amy Roland.

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