FROM THE LITTLE BLACK PRINCESS TO BIGGLES:
Representations of the Northern Territory
in Children's Literature

by

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

15. (Withdrawn)
18. They of the Never Never, by Peter Forrest. (1990)


27. Rebuilding the Beacon: Point Smith, Port Essington, by Frank Flynn. (1992)


29. The Northern Territory Coast, by John Knight. (1992)


35. Melding of Two Spirits: from the 'Yiminga' of the Tiwi to the 'Yiminga' of Christianity, by Sister Anne Gardiner. (1993)

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INTRODUCTION

This is the text of a talk given on 23 September 1992 at the State Library, as one of the Library's "Under the Banyan Tree" series of lunchtime entertainments.

Mickey's MA thesis has recently been adapted for publication, and reached the public in November 1992 as The Black War. Her PhD thesis on children's literature in the Northern Territory is almost complete, if Mickey can bring herself to stop reading new little gems, and it is on this subject that Mickey has chosen to speak today.

This is a much-neglected subject area, and we are happy to provide this erudite but immensely interesting short work, which complements Mickey's other piece in our Occasional Papers series (no.32, Snorters, Fools, and Little 'uns.)
The title of this paper rather begs the question: "why children's literature?" Children's literature is important although frequently it is considered, if at all, as subordinate to adult literature. But the practice of distinguishing between adult and children's literature is a relatively recent one. In the nineteenth century, as Rosemary Wighton has noted, "it is very difficult to decide whether a book is really a children's book at all" (Wighton, 13). (The distinction between what constitutes a children's author and what is considered adult appears to be equally blurred. In the 1890s, Ethel Turner, for example, was ranked by The Bulletin with Banjo Patterson and Louis Becke as examples of successful Australian authors; Henry Lawson, in contrast, was considered to be "approaching the goal" (Niall 1979, 18).)

By now everyone is quite familiar with the debate over the re-writing of Enid Blyton or the often cumbersome inclusion of non-sexist princesses who want to be car mechanics and refuse to marry wimpish princes in the rewriting of fairy tales. In fact, I was rather inclined to deride the dullness of such politically correct diatribes until an Aboriginal friend of mine commented casually to me of the teasing he had received at school and how relieved he was that Black Golly was no longer going to be the bad character in Noddy. Although Australian children's writers were clear that they were establishing a moral framework within the text it has only been recently acknowledged that children's writers, often consciously, although very often unconsciously, included a political agenda as well.

Taking this as our basic premise, let us look at some of the ways in which the Northern Territory has been constructed in the texts. It is not possible, in the space of this talk, to be definitive, but a sampling of some of the texts for children describing the Northern Territory between 1840 and 1970 seems to suggest that the writing can be categorised into three main periods. Analysis of the material suggests the kinds of messages children were given about the Northern Territory, and through the texts emerge some of the preoccupations and concerns felt by wider Australia relating to settlement in the North.

Much of the writing describing the Northern Territory from the earliest period of white settlement was primarily propaganda to interest and educate an audience towards the notion of northern settlement. Because settlement is not encouraged by a catalogue of the physical and mental hazards of the region, most writers emphasised the benign aspect of landscape of the Northern Territory. At the same time, the remoteness and the exoticness of the locale ensured that it remained a subject of interest where authors had licence to include mention of cannibals, sharks, cyclones and other phenomena. Literary critics have detected an insecurity in many of the descriptions of the Australian landscape in nineteenth century writers like Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Barbara Baynton and others (Rickard, 65; James, 11), where the subjects of the texts feel both at home and alienated from the environment. On one hand the Australian landscape is presented as beautiful, pristine and uncontaminated and on the other, eerie, sinister and frightening. Like the national model, there is a sense of alienation from the landscape in the constructions of the Northern Territory, but in this period a link between settler and the environment is provided by a close
interaction with the Aboriginal owners of the land who appear, at least in the writing, to be on hand to translate the landscape for the new comers.

The main values inherent in this early description of the Northern Territory in this period are perhaps surprising although, on consideration, consistent with what might be termed the "pioneering" stage. Although Charlotte Barton's *A Mother's Offering* offered a strictly imperialist and racist interpretation of events elsewhere in New South Wales, the author was more indulgent with respect to northern settlement. The healthy climate and the helpfulness of the Aborigines were emphasised. *A Mother's Offering*... contained a whole chapter describing the British settlement at Port Essington (Barton, 137f). Although the settlement is described as "hot" it is considered "particularly healthy" (Barton, 143). Health was a preoccupation with the writers at this time since it was considered a biological freak of nature for white people to live north of the Tropic of Capricorn and much "scientific" discussion was taken up by the debate. The salubrious nature of the Territory landscape was emphasised by Joseph Bowes in *Comrades* where Tony and his cousin Jack are taken by their Uncle Rod to "Bauhinia Downs" in the Northern Territory to recover from pneumonia. Uncle Rod tells them, "I'm standing testimony against the lies that are told about the north. The tropics are as healthy as any zone upon the earth". "Ah well uncle" declares Mrs Larnach, "from this time forth I'll think of the Northern Territory as being as healthy as a sanatorium, as cool as an ice-cream, and as peaceful and safe as our own village" (Bowes, 23–24). Bowes' description of the Northern Territory Gulf country is exuberant in its praise:

*Here, in wonderful profusion and variety, grew the fig, oak, pine, myrtle, cotton, acacia, baobab and other eucalyptus tree, together with shrubs of endless kinds and colours. Glorious orchids of flaming beauty hung... bird-nest, elk-horn, and stag-horn ferns, whose antler fronds gracefully stirred in the breeze, added to the tree decorations. Lawyer and other cane vines garlanded the trees, interlacing them with a tapestry of living, woven green, which effectively screened the brilliant bars of tropical light."

*The woods were stocked with game. Ducks, geese and wading birds in great numbers fed among the rushes and reeds which grew along the water's edge. Numbers of alligators were to be seen sunning themselves on the mud banks, or floating with the current like logs of wood.* (Bowes, 80)

But while the Top End was viewed as tropical splendour, writers were more cautious in their enthusiasm for the desert. The landscape was not seen as quite so healthy in Carlton Dawe's *The Golden Lake* where Dick Hardwicke, his cousin Archie and the trusty Jimmy, King of the Murrumbidgee, set off to find a cave of gold in Central Australia. But the country was considered beautiful and, anticipating a theme which would be exploited by later writers, spiritual: "For there is a weird and terrific beauty in these vast stretches of loneliness; they seem to bring you nearer to Him, and the fate of all earthly things" (Dawe, 47). George Cossins was more prosaic about the charms of the Central Australian desert. In *The Wings of Silence* Dr Don McIntyre and his party discover a cave in a strange rock formation containing gold nuggets, diamonds, rubies, amethysts and emeralds. McIntyre exclaims, "Fancy here, in the centre of the most sterile and apparently worthless portion of Australia, coming upon such a find as this" (Cossins, 212).
Although Jeanie Gunn apparently enjoyed her stay in the Territory, it is evident that she never found the landscape understandable, but this could well be merely the contrast between the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal response to the environment. Here she described the difference between her reactions to the bush and the Aboriginal women from Elsey:

_They tried to teach me the tracks of the animals, how to tell if they were new or old, where every bird builds its nest, and what it is built of ... They knew the tracks of every horse on the run, and every blackfellow of the tribe ... They tried hard to teach me this but try as I would, I could never see any difference, excepting in the size. They were very patient teachers, and I tried my very best; but I suppose I had not the blackfellow's sight for tiny differences, and I failed dismally. I couldn't even learn the tracks of my own lubras_ (Gunn 1963, 27–8).

In this period in the literature, the relationship between the white settlers and the Aborigines appears to be close and it is apparent that in many cases the settlers depended upon Aboriginal knowledge and understanding of the environment. In _A Mother's Offering_ the Aborigines are a "simple wandering race, entirely without clothing" but "inoffensive". Mrs Saville points out how reliant the settlement was upon Aboriginal expertise: they helped the settlers to construct dwellings and shelters, supplied the settlement with fish and honey (Barton, 143) and assisted the newcomers to find water and navigate through the thickly wooded terrain (Barton, 156–7). Like Barton, the only other female writer from this period also recognised that white people were reliant upon Aboriginal expertise. Despite her obvious sense of racial superiority, Jeannie Gunn recognised the cohesion of Aboriginal society, its respect for traditional law (Gunn, 14) and, unusually for the time, realised the subordinate role white people played in Aboriginal society (Gunn, 41–42).

Dawe was not so sympathetic in his depiction of Aborigines. But again the picture of white reliance on Aboriginal expertise emerges. The faithful Jimmy, "King of the Murrumbidgee", is courageous and resourceful, a "splendid bushman and tracker" and Dick has "glowing accounts of his valour and sagacity" (Dawe, 33). The brave and beautiful Lusota defies the tyrant Wanjula and denounces him publicly as a murderer, eventually losing her life resisting his domination (Dawe, 213f, 266). But racial tension is not absent. The evil King Kalua in Dawe's _The Golden Lake_ appears to have been the result of an exploitative sexual relationship. Kalua's speech to Dick and Archie contains a passion that is largely absent from the rest of the narrative and shows that Aboriginal accommodation, evident in the constructions of Barton and Gunn, was only one response out of the whole spectrum of inter-cultural conflict inherent in white settlement of Aboriginal land:

_Ye have journeyed as only the white man will journey for the precious metal; but the desert is wide, and the vultures caw loudly. I know ye, for I am partly of your race, and have some of the poison of your blood within me. My mother loved the white man; but he was a beast who thrashed her till her spirit was broken, and then drove her from him with threats to kill if she should return. Then was she forced to fly to the wilderness. She journeyed on many days, till, falling sick with exhaustion, I was born. And the white man's blood was in my veins, and I was hated by my people. And they made a law that I should die, because they also hated the white man. One night I stole from the camp and took to the desert, I, a boy._ (Dawe, 169)
Even less sympathetic than Dawe were Cossins and Favenc. Cossins gives an unpleasant picture of Aboriginal family life in Kalkari, "cruel ... quarrelsome and greedy", who abuses his wife Muminnie, "small, thin and unutterably repulsive", and murders his own child (Cossins, 1, 2, 187). Although again there is evidence of reliance on Aboriginal expertise as well. McIntyre's team in *The Wings of Silence* are guided by an Aboriginal assistant, Marna who "was, for a blackfellow, very capable", and Charlie believes that, "there's a good deal in some of the blacks' yarns" (Cossins, 186-7). Favenc's indigenous Australians were cannibals in *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (Favenc 1894, 64-5), who worship at a stone sacrificial altar (Favenc 1894, 139) and bury their priests with funerary treasure (Favenc 1894, 158). His *Marooned on Australia* has an equally fantastic construction and describes the lost civilization of the Quadrucos with the exotic Princess Azolta and Prince Zolca.

Whilst Favenc used the Northern Territory as a setting for his novels and some of his short stories, he was obviously not bound by a strict sense of the realistic narrative. Rosemary Wighton considered Favenc to have distinguished between real live Aborigines, who act as trackers, guides and "harmless nomads", and "the now vanished race that he invents", which provide "endless horrors like cannibalism and mysterious altars and exterminations" (Wighton, 35). But it is difficult to separate the two and the reader feels confronted by Favenc's picture of Aboriginal savagery and violence. The Red Page of *The Bulletin* criticised Favenc for a promulgation of racist attitudes: "One notes with interest how unconsciously Mr Favenc takes the bushmen's view of relationships with the blacks" (Frost, 60)

In *Comrades* there is a Favenc-style emphasis upon the dangers for white explorers and settlers from Aborigines. The co-operative nature of the relationship between Aborigines and white settlers is maintained in the descriptions of the "laughter-loving friendly station blacks" of the type familiar to readers of Barton and Gunn, but added to this there is the notion of the wild Aborigines as threatening to the settlers. This backdrop of dangerous natives, only hinted at by Barton and Gunn, becomes central to the heroism of the characters in *Comrades*. The author finds it necessary for the boys to "bowl a few over" with their guns when under attack. Here is Bowes' description of Tony's first close encounter with an Aborigine in the Northern Territory away from the pastoral station:

> the object that met his sight was the form of a blackfellow. This savage, with a fiendish leer on his ebony face, stood over him, spear in hand. His look and mien were those of undoubted hostility ... There seemed no hope of escape ... Without arms, unhorsed, fagged out, both his steed and himself tightly held by those who at the first attempt to break away would not hesitate to spear him, or else brain him with their nulla-nullas, the prospect was not a cheerful one. (Bowes, 219, 221)

These descriptions of violence inherent in Aboriginal–non-Aboriginal relations, which were almost paradoxically absent from the earlier writing, in the next stage become increasingly crucial to the writers' development of their narrative. I say paradoxically, because in fact, racial conflict as a result of white settlers attempting to drive Aboriginal people from their land by physical force, is documented as fairly widespread in the Northern Territory during this early period. But racial conflict seems most commonly talked about in retrospect. It is significant for example that Favenc, whose experience was mainly as a settler in Queensland, emphasised the role of violence. The Aboriginal wars in Queensland occurred during the 1860s–1880s,
a generation earlier than Favenc's descriptions of the Northern Territory. In the Northern Territory throughout this period, massacres of Aborigines continued but did not become the subject of literature. Racial violence in literature occurs when the incidences of real-life conflict have been largely resolved.

The "pioneer" model, of reassurances of the safety of the environment and a recognition of the dependence upon Aboriginal interpretation of the landscape for food, water, settlement and labour, passed on to another stage which roughly coincided with the Commonwealth takeover of the administration of the Northern Territory from South Australia. The writing after about 1912 emphasised a "bush legend" which was far more likely to detail the hazards and dangers of the landscape. Bowes' Comrades marks the beginning of the Northern Territory children's adventure stories, and by the 1920s the emphasis was focused upon action rather than description.

Australian writing of the 1920s and 1930s found a popular audience for what the Bulletin dubbed the "landscape" school of writers. The "landscape" writers, such as Ion Idriess, Frank Clune and William Hatfield, emphasised, in a resurgence of the bush tradition of the 1890s, an Australia populated by lean laconic bushmen with tough, honest values. The cities were presented as corrupt, sinful places and were usually the home of any dishonest rogues in the stories. The authors were not writing for prospective settlers but for a suburban market, so the greater the dangers, the more exciting the plot. The heroes were all white men and Aborigines, far from taking a cooperative role, were seen as threatening. Ironically though, Aborigines actually participate least in the narratives during this period than at any other stage in Australian writing.

This movement in popular writing had its echoes in the children's literature of the time and many of the landscape writers can be considered in the children's category. Saxby noted that Idriess had "always been popular with boys from fourteen years and even younger" and that they offered "real life adventure from outback Australia" (Saxby, 174). Similarly Saxby found William Hatfield's novels, particularly Buffalo Jim, to belong to "the tradition of early boys' pioneering adventure story" (Saxby, 174). Alongside the more enduring children's writers of the period, there were a plethora of boys' adventure stories published with a Territory setting which are no longer widely read. Novels such as The Valley of a Thousand Deaths (c.1920), Golden Buckles (1920), In the Musgrave Ranges (1922), The Golden Valley (1924) or Splendid Savage (c.1925) by Conrad Sayce; James Downie's The Treasure of the Never-Never (c.1936) and The Spell of the Inland: A Romance of Central Australia (1923) clearly enjoyed the popularity of the times, if not enduringly so. A small stream of the didactic continued to run through Territory children's literature in this period. Despite their frequently wildly implausible plots, the books were, in fact, praised for their accuracy. Conrad Sayce, for example, was criticised for producing only "conventional plots and wooden characters" but commended on the basis that he exhibited "an intimate knowledge of outback localities and conditions" (Wilde et al, 609–610).

By this stage, there was a clear consciousness of the bushman tradition, particularly as enshrined in literature. Sayce thought the Australian bushman the best in the world (Sayce (a), 29). Bob Wright, the hero of Armour's Burning Air had: "read books on exploring, and his ambition was to get out into the wilds of Australia" (Armour, 16). The outback was invariably populated by men of strength and character:
He was perhaps eighteen years of age, lean but sturdy, his strong smiling face bronzed to the colour of mahogany, his long moleskin-clad legs bowed slightly from a life spent in the saddle. From his wide-brimmed sombrero to his spurred, elastic-sided stockman boots, he was a son of the vast open spaces of the great "outback". (Downie (b), 39)

The harsh environment of the bush forged a different kind of person, as EV Timms' hero, John Manners explained, "most true bushmen are gentlemen, even if their manners and conversation seem rough and primitive to a city-dweller" (Timms, 58). Guns and the ability to fight were the mark of the manly adventurer. Hatfield described the sneers of Willis, "the usual bush township loafer" at the boyish Westcott arming himself for the Central Australian gold expedition in Buffalo Jim. After Westcott dislocates his opponent's arm in a fight the expedition all congratulate themselves on gaining such an asset (Hatfield 1938, 96).

The overwhelming mythology that consumed the Territory writers throughout this century, for both children as well as adults, was the belief that the Territory contained fabulous mineral wealth. The thread of pursuit of a Lasseter-type Reef dominated many of the stories. Cronin's heroes find the "remains of fabulous riches" in The Treasure of the Tropics. Sayce made a search for a hidden gold reef, told to others by dying or delirious men, the plot for The Golden Valley, The Valley of a Thousand Deaths and In the Musgrave Ranges. EV Timms' The Valley of Adventure (1926) describes an exciting, adventurous Territory where white people are automatically heroes and gold discoveries promise a bright future of development. Armour's Burning Air covered the same material as does James Downie's The Treasure of the Never Never and of course Idriess' Lasseter's Last Ride. Idriess' description fits the dream, "Lasseter had found a gold reef; the yellow stuff was in it thick as plums in a pudding. It lay away out in Central Australia, near the Western Australian border, right on the desert fringe" (Idriess 1980, 1). William Hatfield's Buffalo Jim (despite the title) was, in a large part, a description of an expedition to Central Australia to look for a fabulous gold reef. Hatfield noted how, particularly since Australia was in the grip of severe economic Depression, the hope of finding gold consumed everyone:

It acted like a drug on Westcott's senses. Every ton of rock in that reef worth over four thousand pounds - a fortune in every one-horse dray-load of it! Then it wasn't a myth, this hidden gold in the Australian desert. You could still come across it ... It didn't matter about going for days without so much as a pannikin of water for your daily wash on rising. Who'd care whether he was clean or dirty, shaven or bearded, so long as he was shovelling up gold at the rate of thousands of pounds' worth an hour. (Hatfield 1938, 145–6)

Despite the belief in the savage beauty of the landscape, many of the writers sought to impose an order upon it often linked to this theme of mining and mineral wealth. Many of the Territory writers looked optimistically towards a glorious future when the landscape would be transformed as a result of white settlement. The countryside was presented in terms of its future potential: "This tract of country, though now entirely devoid of men or animals, is of such a character that it will some day support a thriving population" (Sayce (a), 27). Armour noted that "somebody must live out in the back country if we are ever going to develop Australia" (Armour, 95) and he prophesied (correctly) that the mining of radioactive ore would lead to urban Territory development:
science and industry would transform those hills. Around them roads would run. Motor-cars would dash to and fro. The merry voices of children would be heard playing among the stones. Then above the stones ... would be bridges, towers and buildings and the whole life of a city. On these hills and valleys a city must spring up – a city that would claim the best from the rest of the world. (Armour, 106)

EV Timms' *Valley of Adventure* finishes with John Chisholm predicting: "Sanctuary Island will be a great gold-mine, and the green tunnel a highway of industry ... Men and machinery will transform the valley as long as the gold-cliff pours out its wealth" (Timms, 237). Idriess too evoked the image of the Territory landscape transformed by white settlement: "when the white man came ... he would cover the land with wells and lakes in the form of station tanks; he would make many blades of grass grow where one grew now" (Idriess 1980, 73). The second half of Hatfield's *Buffalo Jim* is taken up with descriptions of Jim's efforts to dam, fence and cultivate the pastoral holding. The idea of carving the future prosperity of the Territory from an inhospitable landscape was the white man's burden:

> They felt they were face to face with the power of untamed nature – the desert and the savage inhabitant of it – and that even they were units in an army of progress which was conquering that nature and making it minister to the needs of civilised man. (Sayce (b), 91)

This period of Territory children's writing asserts the white heroic bush legend of toughness and resourcefulness against all odds. The Aborigines, when they appear in the texts, particularly in the early part of the period, are menacing savages to be ruthlessly suppressed by white domination. In effect, the texts are legitimising and consolidating the white occupation of the Territory. But slowly the ideas of the social sciences passed from academic to popular and the public reactions to such injustices as the Coniston massacres and the trial of Tuckiar for the east Arnhem Land killings influenced the way Australians regarded Aborigines. By the end of this period it is clear that a change in attitude had taken place. This progression in Territory writing was a reflection of the trend apparent in mainstream Australian children's literature, nicely illustrated by Brenda Niall's analysis of Jim Linton's attitude to Aborigines throughout the thirty year span of the "Billabong" books. In 1914 Jim Linton considers Aborigines "a most unpleasant crowd – the lowest, I believe, in the scale of civilization", but by 1942 Jim tells Wally that Aboriginal culture is "a deeper thing than we can understand ... I don't feel at all superior when I'm with blacks; I feel rather like a usurper" (Niall 1979, 166, 173).

There is a continued feeling of economic optimism about the Territory and a faith in mineral development to stimulate economy. But the impact of World War II with its ensuing infrastructure of roads and rail, its northern settlements and Aboriginal "Assimilation" policy would leave little room for the plucky celibate masculine pre-War Territorian. In the Territory, post-war development would be planned, scientific; it was after all, the atomic age.

The post-war Territory, with the Aboriginal assimilation policy firmly entrenched, removed the focus from the heroic bushman to a slightly more self-conscious awareness of Aborigines in the Territory, although children's stories continue to stress the adventure and the romance of the Territory lifestyle. Mining in the Territory, particularly uranium mining, continued to be of interest (Barter 1991). Some of the
optimism towards nuclear energy is apparent in the period in the enthusiasm authors express towards the development of a Territory uranium industry. Children's writers incorporated this fervour as a part of the narrative. Although a uranium find becomes a popular goal, gold and other mineral ores manage to hold a place in the mythology of the Territory. Mary, in Phyllis Power's *Nursing in the Outback* (1959), suspects that she and Sister Hannah are lost in uranium country, but the pair find an opal field after they have been kidnapped by gold smugglers (Power 1959, 106, 128, 189). In *Adventure in the Outback* (1957) Bert and Al discover that the cattle rustlers are secretly looking for uranium with a geiger-counter, "usually they're after gold", but after the boys discover copper and uranium-rich ore, the novel ends happily with the family pegging a claim on the station at "Prince's Soak" (Power 1957, 111, 113, 135). In Bengt Danielsson's *Terry in Australia* (1958), the pastoralist, White, is consumed by a quest to find radioactive ore on his property. Biggles arrives to tackle an international spy gang who want to discover more about Australia's uranium deposits in *Biggles in Australia* (1955). *Biggles Works it Out* (1951) was about a great gold robbery at the Northern Territory mine "Barula Creek".

The landscape, as described by the earlier writers, continues to be presented as a positive force for both economic gain and character building. Richard Graves' *Spear and Stockwhip* (1950) described the adventures of "Stones" Flint who runs away from school and becomes a drover with a group of other lads. Saxby summed up the novel fairly accurately as "an uninspired droving-adventure story which aspired to be a picaresque novel of mateship" (Saxby 1971, 191). But the hardships of the experience turn Stones and his pals into responsible men. Allan Aldous' *Doctor with Wings* (1960) although appearing on the surface to be preoccupied with modernity, concentrating as it does on the impact of technology upon the outback, contained much the same message. Like Graves, Aldous expressed a rather class conscious interpretation of "mateship" where it was seen as a marvel of outback democracy that the Doctor's son could be friends with the runaway boy from the urban slums. There is also the suggestion that the ordeal of the waterless trek through the desert will reform the slum boy and make him into a contributing member of society.

But the power of the outback to reform individuals and build character, as opposed to the corruption of the cities, is an old theme. Towns, generally, are not praised in literature describing the Northern Territory. Frequently they are simply synonymous with crooks, rogues and other low-life. Although Aldous emphasised the "Americanisation" of Alice Springs, the exotic, multi-cultural nature of Darwin rated a mention in Phyllis M. Power's *Adventure in the Outback* (Power 1957, 30) and, using almost exactly the same terms, Capt WE Johns' *Biggles in Australia*:

> as strange an assortment of humanity as could be found in any port of earth, east or west. Stockmen in sombreros; Chinese vendors of potato chips; pearlers; black boys on bicycles; Greek merchants, and seamen of every colour and race under the sun – Malays, Indonesians, Cingalese, Maoris, and Melville Islanders who had paddled their canoes across sixty miles of shark-infested water to go to the cinema and watch white screen stars doing things that must have been incomprehensible to them. (Johns, 83)

Some of the children's stories, particularly in the latter part of this period, were capable of a more compromising attitude towards Territory life, although arguably, no more realistic. Joan Woodberry's *Come Back Peter* anthropomorphised the outback which,
siren-like, only revealed itself to male audiences and lured them to their doom. Paul noted:

*His mother thought that this was the Outback – the Never Never – but he knew that... the Outback did not start here. The men had gone Outback, but wherever they were, the Outback itself still existed beyond the horizon. You never got to the Outback; it was always in front of you, beckoning, tantalising, and when it could, destroying. (Woodberry, 55)*

That the outback only beckons males is not surprising. Females do not make up a large component in literature about the Northern Territory, and perhaps even less so in the children's literature although Phyllis M. Powers' characters are the exception. Sister Hannah is capable and confident, Mary is a brilliant and courageous pilot who can fix any machinery. Mrs Snowdon drives a truck confidently, tutors the boys in correspondence and can leap quickly into a tree when pursued by an angry steer. "Just watch the lubras ride, they're even better than the men, and don't they just love the work" says Al to the new-chum Bert (Power 1957, 63)

But many of the novels contain the recommendation "for boys", so perhaps female characters were thought redundant. Captain WE Johns has no female character in his Territory "Biggles" novels (less because of the outback mythology than because Johns apparently believed "Boys hate the introduction of girls into their stories" (Johns 1992)). Joan Woodberry's female characters in *Come Back Peter* are universally depicted as unable to function in the Territory outback. Paul's mother is on the edge of a nervous breakdown after the premature death of her son Peter. Johnnie Moran's mother is sick and unable to cope while her husband is away. The Irish maid, old Biddy, is nostalgic for her early days on the station. James Vance Marshall's *A Walk to the Hills of the Dreamtime* has a female protagonist who is locked in a cross-cultural struggle with a magical Aboriginal elder after the two children have been found by an Aboriginal group wandering lost in the desert. Although Sarah wins the cultural debate, as it were, with the assertion of the power of the Christian magic, she loses her life in the process.

Richard Graves' *Spear and Stockwhip* contains few references to women, although of the only female mentioned Tom remarks admiringly, "they're tough, these northern women" (Graves, 113). Bengt Danielsson's *Terry in Australia* has very positive female role models. Granny and Elizabeth rescue Terry and his father after their vehicle breaks down (Danielsson, 59). Granny wins the Alice Springs Queen's Birthday shooting competition and the tall tales competition with her stories of the sea (Danielsson, 82). She also dynamites cattle rustlers from an aeroplane (Danielsson, 100) and proves herself more culturally sensitive and adaptive than the Australian pastoralist, the ironically named "White" (Danielsson, 135, 140). But Danielsson's book is unusual and perhaps reflects the Swedish cultural influence rather than Australian.

Aborigines were a popular component of children's literature of the Northern Territory at this time and written about more than in any other period of Territory writing. The importance that Aborigines had, as components to the stories in this period, indicated a strong desire to compartmentalise them, to package them into a form that was easily understandable to whites. An extension, in fact, of the Federal Aboriginal Assimilation policy that was attempting to do the same thing in Australian society. Aborigines were represented as fitting into two categories, each interesting in the construction that non-Aboriginal writers placed upon them.
Firstly Aborigines filled the role of "savage natives", depicted with more or less sympathy depending on the perspective of the author, in the formula adventure stories that were still popular. In *Biggles in Australia*, Biggles, Algry, Ginger and the gang try to catch spies who are attempting to foment a Mau-Mau type uprising amongst the Aborigines. More plausibly, Bengt Danielsson's *Terry in Australia* is an account of a visit of a British family to a pastoral property near Alice Springs. This book offered the least compromising interpretation of the Territory and attempted to raise some of the implications of white settlement of the Northern Territory by looking critically at "Aboriginal policy" (Danielsson, 70). But such an uncompromising look at political policy was unusual. Phyllis M. Power, although giving her Aboriginal characters a strange pidgin English to speak and referring to them as "Abos", nevertheless points out that Ivy is quite capable of looking after the clinic (Power 1959, 170). The Prince family is heavily reliant upon Timboora's exceptional skill in the pastoral industry (Power 1957, 65). Tom Prince tells the lads that the reason that he has an amicable relationship with his Aboriginal workers is because he respects their sacred sites (Power 1957, 82). Graves' *Spear and Stockwhip* contains the usual cliches, although "Darkie" and "Baroopa", the Aboriginal boys, are depicted as courageous and intelligent. Darkie is the son of an ANZAC hero and, at the end of the book, in fine support of the Federal Assimilation policy, his Aboriginal mother states that the boys must learn responsibility and "have a greater education" (Graves, 161) before taking up life as pastoralists. Less appealing is Aldous' summation of race relations in Alice Springs in *Doctor With Wings*: "'Trouble is', said the doctor driving the car, 'we get too many American Western films. The abos go for them in a big way. Lazy lot most of them. Lounge around waiting for tourists to give 'em five bob for posing for them while they click away their rolls of Kodachrome" (Aldous, 11-12).

Secondly, Aborigines were seen in roles that emphasised their spirituality and complex society. Although overtly more sympathetic than the adventure category, nothing very realistic occurs in the writing. Particularly popular during this period was an interest in Aboriginal legends and lifestyle, and the influence of the anthropologists is clear. Alongside missionary writer Ann Wells' collections *Tales from Arnhem Land, Rain in Arnhem Land*, etc., Jindyworobak poet Rex Ingamells published *Aranda Boy*, a story about the life of Gurra, an Aranda from Central Australia, very reminiscent of Hatfield's *Desert Saga*. Ingamells acknowledged assistance from Ted Strehlow, Bill Harney and fellow Jindyworobak Roland Robinson. Robinson himself published several collections of Aboriginal mythology for children after consultation with several communities in the Northern Territory, *Legend and Dreaming* (1952) for example. Erle Wilson's *Churinga Tales: Stories of Alchuringa – the Dream-time of the Australian Aborigines* (1950) was another popular children's account. CP Mountford also published several books of Aboriginal legends, as did Alan Marshall. Perhaps the popular view of Aborigines as intensely spiritual persons by writers of the Territory in the 1970s had its genesis in the solid diet of a "primitive" Aboriginal spirituality that was fed to these authors as children.

It was in this post-war period too that the iconography was firmly established in mainstream Australian suburban life. Aborigines were not legally permitted to drink alcohol, but bar towels with a repeated motif of spear carrying Aborigines decorated a good many pubs throughout Australia. Aborigines may not have been welcomed in the living rooms of the predominantly white suburbs, but their image appeared on tea towels, ashtrays, wall hangings, holding lamps, ornamental boomerangs and the like. A good example of the representation of Aborigines presented to children in this...
period can be found in a comparison between the works of photographer Axel Poignant and cartoonist Eric Joliffe. Axel Poignant devoted a considerable part of his life to photographing Northern Territory Aborigines after his interest had been kindled initially by his work on the Ealing Studios film *The Overlanders* and later with his work on Namatjira. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s Poignant continued to work and photograph Aboriginal people all over the Territory. After photographing people from the Liverpool River area in Arnhem Land in 1953 he travelled on to Milingimbi where he took the photographs for a children's story written by Raiwalla and translated by the linguist there. Axel Poignant's *Piccaninny Walkabout: A Story of Two Aboriginal Children* won 1958 Picture Book of the Year award (Saxby 1971, 188).

Eric Joliffe, like the other artists interested in representing the Northern Territory, consulted with anthropologists and undertook travel from the Centre to Arnhem Land, sketching the scenery and people. Despite or perhaps because of his seemingly frivolous work representing Aboriginal men as "stone age" humorists and the Aboriginal women's bodies drawn in almost pornographic realism, Joliffe's cartoons were enormously popular. By the early 1970s, books reprinting his characters had sold more than 6 million copies (Ryan, 60). Joliffe appeared sincere in his relationship with Aborigines. He claimed after meeting Arnhem Landers:

> It was love at first sight. As a bushman I could appreciate their deep love and understanding of their country. Their capacity to live off the harsh land and their complex social and cultural life never failed to absorb me. (Ryan, 59)

Saxby wrote, in a clear reference to Joliffe, that he hoped that Axel Poignant's *Piccaninny Walkabout* "helped to erase from the minds of children some of the crude strip-stories of the aborigines" (Saxby 1971, 282). It is clear that intelligent people distinguished between the two representations. Yet from a 1992 perspective it is difficult to see the distinction. With the exception of the "humour" denigrating women, Poignant's photographs are almost Joliffe to the life. Poignant's book looks highly contrived and, although both the children and the Arnhem Land landscape are spectacularly photogenic, the whole tone and content of the book would have continued to support the popular view of the Territory landscape as an inviolate wilderness populated by wild blacks. As in Joliffe's depiction of Witchetty and his tribe, the Aborigines are all topless spear-carrying naga-wearers and, apart from bark shelters, there is not a building to be seen. That this representation should bear only a passing resemblance to reality was of little concern.

This post-war period maintained the idea of a Northern Territory economically supported by the development of the mining industry. After the comparative silence of the pre-World War II period, there was a huge increase in interest on the part of writers for incorporating Aborigines within children's texts. Within this non-Aboriginal construction, Aborigines were presented to children in the writing within a wide spectrum which had savage natives at one end, and anthropologically interesting myth-makers at the other. The interest in their inclusion as subject matter indicates the degree of preoccupation the dominant society felt to include Aborigines in some comprehensible form in the writing. The texts reflect the political developments current in Australia at this time.
George Orwell once commented on the influence of childhood reading:

To what extent people draw their ideas from fiction is disputable. Personally I believe that most people are influenced far more than they would care to admit by novels, serial stories, films and so forth, and that from this point of view the worst books are often the most important, because they are usually the ones that are read earliest in their life. It is probable that many people who would consider themselves extremely sophisticated and "advanced" are actually carrying through life an imaginative background which they acquired in childhood. (Orwell, 200)

In the world of Australian children's writing we can detect a progression of attitudes and values inherent in the way that the Northern Territory has been described by authors. In the earliest period, the writing stresses the accommodating aspects of both landscape and Aboriginal race relations. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Australian writers emphasised the heroics of masculine conquest of the land and its original inhabitants. At the same time, for a nation in the grip of severe economic depression, the potential of the Northern Territory as a source of wealth made it seem a virtual El Dorado. In the post–World War II developments, the writing shared the tremendous optimism associated with the advent of the Atomic age and a desperate urge to incorporate the Aboriginal experience within the dominant non–Aboriginal cultural hegemony. This urge to promote and transmit a sense of Aboriginal culture within a non–Aboriginal context led to a concentration upon Aborigines as "primitive" but spiritual beings.

Children's writing has often found a geographical location in the Northern Territory, because it provides a setting seen as remote from the urban experiences which dominate Australian cultural life, allows for a freedom to include exotic hazards of climate and animals, and provides a context for the definition of white Australian society against the backdrop of an Aboriginal–occupied landscape. A study of children's literature set in the Northern Territory provides an indication of the current social attitudes and indicates a progression of the politics of northern settlement. The Territory was often the geographical location for children's stories, but did not always seem to be the same place.
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