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Picturing Australian History: Visual Texts in Nonfiction for Children

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Visual texts work on their readers in a visceral and immediate way, and because of this their capacity to inscribe ideologies is especially powerful. In this chapter I consider visual texts in nonfiction for children published in the 1940s and 1950s on the subject of Australian history. The artworks, maps, charts and photographs which feature as illustrative materials in nonfiction texts of this period are themselves texts of the past, and construct narratives about the past; but they are as much about a projected future, because in them the past constitutes an array of exemplary narratives, promoting in their child readers behaviors and beliefs appropriate to Australian citizens. In the interests of uncovering some of the discursive strategies through which these visual texts position their child readers, I have a two-fold focus: the ways in which the selected visual texts manifest the ideologies and preoccupations of their time and place, and the strategies through which they seek to persuade their child readers of the lessons of history.

On the front cover of a canonical Australian children's text, The Australia Book by Eve Pownall and Margaret Senior, published in 1951 (Photo 11.1), chronology is offered as teleology; the procession of people and animals striding purposefully from past to present enacts a timeline which begins with Captain Cook and identifies Australian history with progress, so that the prosperity of the 1950s, encoded on the bottom row by products of the land (wheat, milk and wool), is seen to derive from the endeavors of convicts, soldiers, settlers and farmers, in an unbroken line of cause and effect. This is also a view of history as
pageant, as a display of types differentiated as to class and occupation but unified by their positioning within a metanarrative around the development of national identity.

There are, in this procession, three transgressive figures. All three feature in the top row, in the years immediately following white settlement; all face towards the left of the picture instead of the right, that is, towards stasis and not change; all are motionless, and all are Aborigines, two children and an adult. It is impossible to consider texts thematizing the Australian past without encountering what the art historian Bernard Smith has called "the locked cupboard of our history," the presence, frequently encoded in absence, of those whose invasion and dispossession was the necessary ground for colonization. The three Aboriginal figures in this picture metonymically represent a people disengaged from history; the fixed gaze of the adult, the stereotypical posture of the child on the left and the waving hand of the child on the right signify a paradoxical combination of inertia and wilfulness, as though the three passively choose to remain in a realm located, as it were, outside the book and so outside both history and modernity.

History as manifested in these images is his-story, not hers. Men are represented here in two ways: in relation to their occupations and as fathers (mainly to sons), but—as in the masculine images of the bottom row—they can straddle the private and public spheres. Women, however, can only be mothers—or, as in the top row, ladies—defined as they are in relation to the maternal; for in the ideological formations which produced this picture, maternity naturally restricts women to the private sphere of home and family.

The boy walking behind the sheaf of wheat on the bottom row and before the bus labelled "To-day" is carrying a copy of the Australia Book and reading it as he walks, a reflexive move which provides him with a multivalent significance, as the reader of the book and as a character experiencing the past as heritage and the present as history in the making, being himself the subject of the historical narrative. This ideological load on the figure of the focalized child seeks to persuade child readers of the linearity of Australian history, its steady progressivism and, in particular, the dynamism of what is constructed as a young country, rich in resources and possibilities.

The final picture from The Australia Book incorporates Australian history into a larger cultural narrative. Captain Cook and his companion stand on a clifftop, and their focalizing gaze looks towards an expansive scene which represents the new Australia. In this scene, an aeroplane represents the brave new world of air travel, but the land below is also made new by technology, for the picture shows a modernist townscape in which the allusions to industry serve to modify the rural mythology of the book's cover. The land itself is tamed and controlled, a neat patchwork of cultivated farmland and vegetation hemmed in by road and fences. Child readers are invited to align their subjectivities with those of a group of children viewed proceeding up a hill and towards the reader, and to join in their triumphalistic march onwards and upwards.

The narrative strategies of selection, shaping and focalization evident in these pictures from nonfiction books are strikingly similar to those which characterize
much historical fiction for children. In addition, these pictures offer visual equivalents of the focalizing characters of historical fiction, for while the verbal text of *The Australia Book* does nothing so postmodern as to interpolate invented child characters into its accounts of historical events, such child figures can be introduced through the visual texts alone, where they serve to invite identification on the part of child readers.

Similar narratalogical and ideological moves are evident in a mass-market text of 1946, Margaret Pearson's *The Story of Australia*, the front and back endpapers of which are of particular interest because of the absences they encode. The front endpapers offer a stylized view of a grassy shore from which is seen a sailing ship, framed by a Union Jack and by the figures of two eighteenth-century children (a midshipman and a servant girl) planting a gum tree. The back endpapers show two 1940s children admiring the tree, which is now very large. Again, Australian history begins with white settlement; more than this, white settlement effects an ontological leap, since Australia, signified by the gum tree, exists only when touched by white hands. The two children on the back endpapers offer child readers subject positions appropriate to history-makers of the future. The two sets of children (the colonial children on the front endpapers and the contemporary children on the back) are framed in the same way, so inviting a reader alignment that reinforces the similarities between present and past, denying the past its alterity and constructing children of the past as “Us in funny clothes.”

Two other forms of visual representation appear in postwar histories of Australia for children: re-presentations of colonial artworks; and drawings, maps, charts and photographs which purport to work as conceptual pictures, explaining history in a realist or scientific mode. Val Biro's illustrations in P. R. Smith's *The Story of Australia* (1959), published in London by Ernest Benn, provide examples of reworkings of colonial artworks. The artworks that constitute Biro's pre-texts for his versions of Australian history were produced by artists in the first years of the colony, and embody not simply what was seen, but how the people, topography, plants and animals of the new land were viewed by European eyes, and what significances were attributed to them. That is, these works speak of the ways in which the unfamiliar was incorporated into existing conceptual models, and of the collisions and gaps which were made manifest when “appropriate words, images, symbols and ideas” had to be found to encode the new.

John Hunter, a naval officer, created a seminal first-fleet drawing later reproduced as an engraving. Reading the land through his knowledge of European landscapes and texts, Hunter writes as follows about his first impressions of Sydney:

Near, and at the head of the harbour, there is a very considerable extent of tolerable land, and which may be cultivated without waiting for its being cleared of wood; for the trees stand very wide of each other, and have no underwood: in short, the woods on the spot I am speaking of resemble a deer park, as much as if they had been intended for such a purpose.
Hunter’s drawing displays a similar blend of idealism and nostalgia, representing Sydney Cove as an idyllic space, the Union Jack fluttering in a neatly-fenced enclosure, Australian trees transmogrified to suit a setting somewhat reminiscent of Capability Brown’s elegantly controlled landscapes. But Hunter and his companions soon discovered that the climate and soil of Sydney Cove had very little in common with those of English deer parks; few of the settlers’ seeds grew, and their animals died. Thus, by the time it was published in Hunter’s Journal in 1793, the drawing signified another set of meanings common in discourse of the early colonial period, that of the Australian landscape as a locus of illusions, “an enchanted park in which things were not what they seemed.”

Hunter’s drawing is introduced into an entirely different set of cultural and reading practices in Biro’s reinterpretation in The Story of Australia. With its caption “Sydney Cove in 1788,” this picture claims to represent how Sydney Cove was, not how it seemed. Biro’s technique, with its reliance on pen-and-ink line, hints at the striations of engraving and so claims both a link with artistic production of the past, through what Jane Doonan, the writer on children’s book illustration, describes as “a certain gravitas,” and an authoritative historicity. Perhaps this illustration is best seen in the light of the sycophantic foreword, by Robert Menzies (then Australia’s Prime Minister), which introduces The Story of Australia, and which proclaims what a splendid thing it is that “a famous publishing house in London” should publish “what are some of the greatest and most romantic stories of the growth and bestowal of the British inheritance.” In drawing on a colonial text, Biro seeks the authority of the “British inheritance” which produced it, but in retaining the features of Hunter’s reading of the land, he naturalizes the colonial significances of Hunter’s drawing, which are of course impenetrable to child readers with no experience of the illustration’s pre-text. A further effect in Biro’s version results from the foreshortening of the scene, which confers on it a certain coziness, so that the huts and tents of the first-fleeters appear more like a holiday camp than a colony.

Another reinterpretation of a colonial text in the same 1959 history shows a scene entitled “Crossing the Blue Mountains.” Here, two men are located on an outcrop, framed by rock formations and twisted tree-trunks and looking out to a scene of cliffs and gullies. The two explorers are placed in a patch of white at the center of the picture, and are constructed as heroic figures battling enormous odds. The artwork on which this scene is based is an anonymous drawing which had appeared as an engraving in an 1888 publication entitled Australia the First Hundred Years: The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia. In the Picturesque Atlas this picture is called simply “Govett’s Leap,” and like others in the atlas it offers the armchair reader scenes observed through picturesque travel. The two men are not of central significance to the scene, being placed off-center and in the shadows; the man standing looks down to the gulf below, not (as in Biro’s representation) out to the new lands to be conquered. In the Atlas version there appears a fence at the top of a lookout, against which stand a woman and a child, a detail which domesticates a view otherwise encoding the grandeur and sublimity valued in picturesque art. The vertical hatching of Biro’s version
recuperates something of the picturesque delight in the Gothic, but the most interesting feature of his treatment of the colonial pre-text lies in the way in which the land is transmuted from spectacle to obstacle, its human figures from aesthetes to conquerors.

The third category of visual texts in Australian histories of the mid twentieth century locates history within frameworks represented as objective and scientific. An illustration featuring Aboriginal artefacts (Photo 11.2) appears in a 1940 school text, the eighth Victorian Reader, in an historical piece entitled “The Old Inhabitants.” It presents its collection of items frontally, against a neutral, flat background, as generic objects used by an objectified and homogenized group (“the Australian Aborigines”). The two sub-categories, “Offensive Weapons” and “Message Stick” are implicitly located within a common “overarching category;” the strangeness of the latter’s taxonomy becomes clear if one considers equivalent western artefacts: say, guns (for offensive weapons) and the telephone which, like message sticks, is a means of communication. The implied overarching category, therefore, may be seen as that of Aboriginal technology, which is implicitly compared with “western technology.” The dominant ideological effect of the illustration, concealed by its façade of analytical description, thus lies in the implicit contrast between the poverty and simplicity of these artefacts and the artefacts of a “developed” or “advanced” culture, a reading supported by the verbal text; its conclusion demonstrates the lasting influence of Social Darwinism well into the twentieth century:

Whether the blacks could have developed much further without communication with the rest of the world is rather hard to decide. It is not clear, either, what animal in Australia they could have tamed for food purposes, if they had wanted to do so; and, without herds of some sort, they could not have attained to a pastoral stage.

The slippage between tenses (present tense in the illustration and past in the narrative) quarantines Aborigines contemporaneous with the production of this text in the ahistorical past occupied by the Aboriginal figures on the cover of The Australia Book. While both visual and verbal texts imply white children as readers, the school readers were so widely used that Aboriginal children must also have read these narratives, positioned through textuality as objects of colonial discourse.

Narratives of exploration loom large in Australian children’s histories of the 1940s and 1950s, generally in conjunction with maps, which plot not only the journeys of explorers but also epistemologies of space and distance. In these maps, explorers are always constructed as the conquerors of virgin territory, and the maps incorporate discovery with the naming by which rivers and mountains are known and possessed. What counts as knowledge is precisely what is encoded in these maps; what does not count is present as absence, for these maps elide Aboriginal knowledge and knowledge systems of the land, distance and significant places. The organizing metanarrative into which the maps of discovery fit is of an Australia known only when it becomes the object of the explorer’s gaze; in the twelve frames of a table from Eve Pownall’s Exploring
Australia (1958), the country comes into being in exactly this way: the outline of Australia is gradually mapped, from non-existence before the seventeenth-century Dutch explorers to the final completed frame, where Australia exists "after 196 years exploration."\(^{13}\)

At the time these texts were published, black and white Australians were producing oppositional readings of history, gender, indigenousness and landscape; the historian John Mulvaney, for example, was conducting research which was to result in his groundbreaking 1969 work, The Prehistory of Australia, which begins with the statement "The discoverers, explorers and colonists of . . . Australia, were its Aborigines."\(^{14}\) But such oppositional readings did not find their way into children's histories and school texts of this period, which are socially conservative and uniformly ethnocentric.

The visual texts on which I have focused construct powerful ideologies by way of their representations of history and of Australia. Many of them, especially those presented as conceptual pictures, seem at first glance to be innocent of ideologies, but it is their very covertness which gives them potency. The child readers of these texts are positioned to believe that the only past that counts is the colonial past constructed through narratives about white male heroes, and that they themselves are the subjects of new narratives sustaining and continuing the colonial past in a new, technological world. Finally, I return to Bernard Smith's phrase, "the locked cupboard of our history,"\(^{15}\) which reminds me of a Pandora's box or a Bluebeard's room upon which is placed an interdiction bound to be broken. The cupboard containing Aboriginal narratives is, in many of these texts of the 1940s and 1950s, not so much locked as concealed, denying child readers even the knowledge that it exists. This is, of course, itself a discursive strategy, one which has found various forms of representation in Australian cultural practice from 1788 until and including the present. In the texts discussed, strategies of silence and concealment concerning Aboriginality position child readers to see Australian history as beginning with white settlement, and to view Aboriginal people as locked in a mystical and mythical past which precludes them from modernity.

NOTES

6. Ibid., p. 179.

REFERENCES