

Marcie Muir

AND HER MAGNIFICENT COLLECTION

STEPHANIE OWEN REEDER DELVES INTO BIBLIOGRAPHER MARCIE MUIR'S REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

ABOVE
 Marcie Muir (1919–2007)
*Bibliography of Australian
 Children's Books*,
 volumes 1 and 2
 (London: Deutsch, 1976)

BELOW
 Rory Muir
 Marcie Muir at her desk,
 early 1990s
 Courtesy Rory Muir

IN THE BOOKSHELVES OF EVERY BIBLIOPHILE live books that are dog-eared, stained, torn and scribbled on. They are books from that very special place—childhood. Marcie Muir (1919–2007), indefatigable bibliographer and champion of Australian children's literature, never stopped collecting such books. When she died, she had over 7000 of them in a floor-to-ceiling bookcase that stretched the full length of the hallway of her house. This

spectacular collection has recently found a new home in the National Library of Australia.

Family circumstances prevented Muir from attending university in the 1930s but she never let her lack of formal training hinder her. When her bookseller husband, Harry, actively encouraged her to undertake what was to become her life's work—a bibliography of Australian

children's books—Marcie took up the project with a passion, totally unaware of the enormity of the task she was undertaking.

Muir attempted to track down every children's book written by an Australian or which featured Australia. In the process of compiling the three volumes of her bibliography—*A Bibliography of Australian Children's Books* (1970, 1976) and *Australian Children's Books: A Bibliography, Volume One, 1774–1972* (1992)—she worked her way through bookstores, private collections and catalogues. She travelled widely, corresponded enthusiastically and, of course, haunted libraries. When she started this mammoth task in the late 1950s and early 1960s, what would become the Library's holdings were stored in hot and dusty Nissen huts. The books were organised alphabetically, with children's books shelved among the adult books. Not surprisingly, the first volume of the bibliography took 15 years to complete.

However, Muir was not content with merely finding books on library shelves. She started collecting them herself. One edition



of a book was never enough—Muir had to track down as many variant editions as she could. And her bibliography was not just a listing of bibliographic details. Rather, she meticulously and painstakingly recorded as much information as possible about each book, physically sighting titles and providing detailed annotations on how various editions differed. She was, indeed, a bibliographer extraordinaire.

Muir did not stop collecting once the final version of her bibliography was published and the equally committed and scholarly Dr Kerry White had taken up her mantle. Muir was well and truly hooked. As well as compiling her bibliographies and acquiring her impressive collection of children's books, Muir wrote prolifically about Australian children's literature, including a history of illustrated books, and biographies of authors and illustrators, such as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite.

Muir's impressive contribution to Australian children's literature won her the National Book Council Bookman's Award 1978, the inaugural Children's Book Council of Australia's Nan Chauncy Award 1983 and the Australian Library Association's Redmond Barry Award 1988.

The heart of the Marcie Muir Collection is the eclectic body of Australian children's books and related ephemera acquired by Muir for the 1970 edition of her bibliography. However, it also includes everything she had collected since the 1970s. This had always been a working collection—Muir was not interested in acquiring handsome tomes just to impress visitors—and so very few of her books are in pristine condition. They often reflect where she purchased them—fetes, book fairs and second-hand bookshops. These are preloved books, and their provenance makes them all the more special.

This is a formed collection. The Library is keeping it intact, including duplicates, and the books are housed together in the Library. (After all, one should never break up a family!) There is a synergy between Muir's collection and the Library's existing collections. There are duplicate copies of rare and fragile books, missing editions which will complete the Library's holdings of a particular book, and some rare and unusual titles which the Library does not already hold.

Muir described Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* (1918) as 'the most distinguished children's book to have been produced in this country'. She purchased many variant editions of this much-loved classic, including the

second state of the first edition—an important addition to the Library's holdings of this rare and valuable book. And there are many other first editions of Australian children's books in the Marcie Muir Collection.

Muir also collected numerous foreign editions. Two outstanding examples are *Sette Piccoli Australiani* (1955), an Italian version of Ethel Turner's classic *Seven Little Australians* (1894), and *El Pudding Magico* (1988), a Spanish translation of the unapologetically Australian *The Magic Pudding*. The front cover of *Sette Piccoli Australiani* depicts a group of children who look like they have just stepped off the set of *The Sound of Music*, and the watercolour illustrations are strikingly un-Australian. Thankfully, *El Pudding Magico* retains Norman Lindsay's distinctive illustrations, including some of his original watercolour portraits of the main characters, such as 'El Pudding' and 'Bunyip Eucalipto', which do not appear in most Australian editions.

May Gibbs and her ubiquitous gumnut babies are an enduring motif. Muir described Gibbs' early work as 'exquisite in conception and execution', and she had an enduring love of and admiration for Gibbs' work. There are many editions of May Gibbs' books in the Marcie Muir Collection, including her first children's book, *About Us* (1912), which is conspicuously gumnut free. There is also a 1940 edition of *Chucklebud and Wunkydoo* and a first edition of *Mr & Mrs Bear and Friends* (1943).

As well as thousands of books, there is also a range of ephemera in the Marcie Muir Collection. This includes Gibbs' gumnut babies immortalised on fabric, magnets, soap, stickers and in a board game. There are also board books, such as the quaintly British-looking *At the Seaside* from the 1940s and *Playdays Picture Book*, made of oiled cloth, with pinking-sheared edges and a guarantee that the colours will not run. Muir also collected preloved colouring-in and painting books. This sort of material is often thrown out but it is well worth keeping, as the illustrations can provide an interesting insight into social conventions of the time.



A Spanish edition of Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* and an Italian version of Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*
Norman Lindsay artwork courtesy Barbara Mobbs Literary Agency



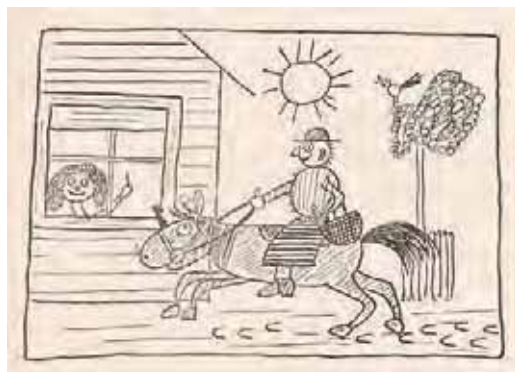
ABOVE
 Agnes Gladys Holman
 (1885–?)
 illustration from
*Our Digger Prince with the
 Australian Kiddies*
 (London: John L. Bennett,
 1921)

BELOW
 C.J. Dennis (1867–1938)
 illustration for 'Riding Song'
 from *A Book for Kids*
 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson,
 1921)

Muir also collected an impressive array of children's novels from the 1800s and early 1900s, most of which were published overseas. Many of them have covers in jewel-like shades of red, green and blue, with gold and silver lettering and decorative flourishes. Unfortunately, the insides do not always live up to the alluring promise of the elegant covers.

Carolyn the Kindest Kangaroo, published in America in 1957, is a cut-out book which shows animals from around the world hopping into a kangaroo's pouch as they head off for a picnic. It is an engagingly twee example of Muir's collection of overseas titles with an Australian theme.

The 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence in Australia of the modern picture-book format—short books with simple texts, reduced colour palettes and illustrations on every double-page spread. Books in Muir's collection by illustrators such as Elisabeth



MacIntyre and Sheila Hawkins illustrate the development of the nascent Australian picture-book industry, which was to take off in the 1970s.

There are also books of historical interest in the collection, such as C.J. Dennis' *A Book for Kids* (1921), which Dennis wrote and illustrated. He is no artist but there is a naïve charm to his black-and-white drawings, and their child-like humour suits the rollicking and humorous nature of his verses.

Two interesting pieces of propaganda aimed at children are also standouts. *Our Digger Prince with the Australian Kiddies* celebrates the visit of Prince Edward to Australia in 1920. Presumably written for a British audience, it shows what lengths the Prince took to mix with the 'natives'. Featuring many Aussie stereotypes, including boxing kangaroos and emu-racing, the brightly coloured illustrations are surprisingly full of character.

War Babies ABC (1917) totally dispenses with any sense of subtlety. It is blatant war propaganda, using cartoon-style illustrations and tortured verse to encourage children to hate 'the Boche' and support 'our Diggers'. Racial stereotypes abound, the humour is adult and one presumes that it was aimed at cheering up parents as much as influencing children. Both these books supplement the Library's existing collection.

Harold Gaze's *War of the Fairies* has a somewhat fractured and sombre version of Humpty Dumpty on the cover and often surrealistic illustrations. It is an excellent example of Gaze's whimsical style, with its echoes of Arthur Rackham. Its acquisition complements the other titles by Gaze held by the Library.

This is just a sample of some of the stunning items to be found in the Marcie Muir Collection. Muir was a remarkable woman whose multi-volume bibliography provides a lasting legacy. The collection ensures that not only Muir's record of Australian children's literature but also many of the books themselves will provide a treasure trove for generations of readers and researchers to come.

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