



# Twinkle, Twinkle, Southern Cross

THE  
FORGOTTEN FOLKLORE  
OF AUSTRALIAN NURSERY  
RHYMES

**Robert Holden**

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The Forgotten Folklore of Australian Nursery Rhymes

Robert Holden



National Library of Australia Canberra 1992

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## Foreword

Through its Australian collections built up over almost one hundred years, the National Library of Australia is a rich repository for a diverse range of materials which record and document Australian life and achievement in many different fields.

Robert Holden, Director of the Museum of Australian Childhood in Sydney, draws on these collections and those of other specialist Australiana libraries to survey and analyse the development of Australian nursery rhymes both as a distinctive form of juvenile entertainment and education and as part of a folkloric tradition. In this work, he presents his own interpretation and sets this particular literary genre into the wider context of the social and

cultural history of Australia. Mr Holden's text is enriched and extended by a wide selection of illustrations chosen from many rare and ephemeral publications held principally in the National Library.

With the generous assistance of the Morris West Trust Fund, the National Library is delighted to publish this book as part of its continuing commitment to share the resources of its great collections with the people of Australia to whom they belong as a major information record and an important part of our national heritage.

Warren Horton  
*Director-General*



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## Preface

The study of nursery rhymes is by its very nature interdisciplinary, requiring some familiarity with folklore, children's and adult literature, popular art and illustration, social and publishing history, and the history of education. Although researchers must guard against thin scholarship in dealing with so many diverse areas of knowledge, they otherwise risk limitations of vision if they believe nursery rhymes, and folklore in general, can be valued and evaluated within a single and narrow discipline.

In this respect, the varying collections of libraries and particularly those of the National Library of Australia have provided a logical basis for this study of indigenous Australian nursery rhymes. The National Library of Australia's collections are inherently interdisciplinary, exhibiting as they do the goal of gathering, organising and preserving knowledge of our culture and history of all kinds and in many formats.

Furthermore, the National Library of Australia is a leading institutional custodian of Australian folklore materials: in the words of the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia*, it 'has demonstrated a long standing and continuing interest in folklife matters, and is easily the government institution in Australia with the best record in this area'.<sup>1</sup>

Understandably, from its strength in these specific areas, this folklore collection is usually thought of in terms of folk song, folk music and oral history sources. While not seeking to diminish their significance or the oral sources of much folklore investigation, it is these rather exclusive attention-getters which need setting against a broader backdrop of national folklife in all its manifestations. Equally, it is all too seldom realised and acknowledged that ever since the invention of printing, folklore has not relied solely on the oral tradition to further its boundaries. The printed word though has not just codified traditional oral material it has also been an originating source in its own right.

From the days of first settlement, Australia added local elements to its imported folklore. In terms of Australian children's folklore such indigenous elements took many forms. In the Australian experience my previous work, again based on National Library holdings, on 'lost in the bush', explored the interaction and development of this Australian theme from fact to fiction to folklore in our printed records.<sup>2</sup>

Equally engrossing are our attempts to produce made-to-order folklore for our children in terms of indigenous nursery rhymes. Much of this effort is scattered through a century of

ephemeral and frequently forgotten pamphlets of verse. The National Library of Australia is particularly rich in its holdings of such material, some of which can be found listed in their publication *Australian Children's Books to 1980: a Select Bibliography of the Collection Held in the National Library of Australia*.<sup>3</sup>

Our bush ballads, galloping rhymes and our adult Australian verse have introduced such folklore figures as 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Clancy of the Overflow'. Surely it is time to populate this imaginative landscape still further with characters from Australian children's folklore. Such nursery rhyme figures as 'The Man from Menindie', 'Sandy the Shearer' and 'Sammy the Swaggie' are as culture specific as any of our adult folk heroes and warrant an equal place in our mainstream culture and consciousness. They are indigenous creations in their own right and should be set within the context of Australian folklore which had its genesis in a written rather than an oral tradition.

Children's folklore derives from two major sources: it can be self generated or it can be imposed by adults who are

usually family members. Thus there are play rhymes and chants, children's *own* folklore, which usually survives by oral transmission across generations of children. In contrast, there is the folklore activity of the family in which adults play a leading role and which is frequently codified in printed form as lullabies, folk and fairy tales, and nursery rhymes. However, even though this secondary form of folklore is imposed it can be every bit as variable as children's own folklore and vary greatly from family to family.

Although nursery rhymes are the main source of poetry for young children, it is the playground rhymes of children in Australia which have received significant attention rather than any indigenous tradition of nursery rhymes. The following work seeks to illuminate previously invisible terrain—the forgotten folklore of Australian nursery rhymes.

Robert Holden  
 Director  
 Museum of Australian Childhood

### Acknowledgements

Every effort has been made to trace and contact all copyright holders of material used in this book. However, the publishers would be pleased to hear from any copyright holders inadvertently overlooked.

An overwhelming debt of gratitude is due to Collins/Angus & Robertson publishers and all who kindly allowed their work to be freely reproduced. They are credited in full in the 'Select List of Sources Consulted' and the 'Key to Illustrations'. I am also grateful to the staff of the National Library of Australia who

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Finally, the research collection of the National Trust's Museum of Australian Childhood was an indispensable asset and supplemented the National Library of Australia's own vast holdings of printed material.

## Introduction

How do we define and categorise the light-hearted charm and uncertain ancestry of the nursery rhyme? The most authoritative guide is surely that provided by Iona and Peter Opie in their *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. According to the Opies the term 'nursery rhyme' seems to have sprung up in the third decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Before this, the rhymes had been known as 'Tommy Thumb Songs' or 'Mother Goose Songs'. Such rhymes, by tacit and universal consent, could be either spoken or sung, but however they were delivered their prime object was, and remains, to soothe and amuse an infant audience. It is also generally accepted that many nursery rhymes were not originally conceived for an audience of nursery age children at all and certainly were not entirely the product of uneducated nurses and beldames of olden times. Many, in fact were the product of capable satirists and versifiers writing for an adult audience!

Following this lead, the Opies embraced

those verses which are traditionally passed on to a child while it is still of nursery age. As well as the nonsense jingles, humorous songs, and character rhymes ... [they included] the more common lullabies, infant amusements, nursery counting-out

formulas, baby puzzles and riddles, rhyming alphabets, tongue twisters, nursery prayers, and a few singing games, the words of which have an independent existence in the nursery.<sup>5</sup>

This categorisation enabled the Opies to draw their nursery rhymes from a considerable variety of sources—from adult as well as juvenile literature, from chapbooks, broadsheets, moral pamphlets, popular songs and verses, and from play, as well as from oral tradition. While some may feel that the Opies' range was too catholic, it does point up the extreme difficulty in defining and categorising the nursery rhyme genre. It would seem safer not to be too dogmatic and simply assert that a nursery rhyme is nothing more or less than a verse, from whatever source, that enters into nursery lore or is composed specifically for a nursery audience. And it is a world into which an old blind fiddler may enter as easily as a Shakespeare.

Now even if we accepted the Opies' wide-ranging definition, the search for Australian equivalents could not be expected to yield such variety granted that our range of printed formats is much smaller and our literary output for children almost entirely a twentieth-century product. This

survey of Australian nursery rhymes is therefore primarily concerned with tracing the largely self-conscious development of indigenous nursery verse and the publishing encouragement such verse attracted. The examples I have chosen, like many of the Opies', are culled from a range of ephemeral and often forgotten booklets and slim volumes of rhymes specifically produced for a nursery audience.



The first known published collection of British nursery rhymes, *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book*, probably appeared in 1744 and by the time the First Fleet sailed for Australia over forty years later the canon of nursery rhyme literature had been steadily augmented. Certainly by the end of the eighteenth century over forty per cent of the nursery rhymes recorded in the Opies' *Dictionary* were in existence and popular favourites clearly circulating before 1788 included 'Sing a Song of Sixpence', 'Hickory, Dickory, Dock', 'Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary', 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep', 'Little Boy Blue', 'Hey Diddle Diddle', 'Jack and Jill', 'Jack Sprat', 'Little Jack Horner' and 'Goosey, Goosey, Gander'.

By the middle of the nineteenth century in England, the burgeoning interest in folklore studies generally, had also prompted a specific interest in nursery rhymes. Many of the rhymes and tales current in British nurseries were collected and commented upon (sometimes rather eccentrically) in James Halliwell's standard reference works: *The Nursery Rhymes of England* (1842) and *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales* (1849). Researchers like Halliwell were overwhelmingly interested in deducing the historical events and personages which supposedly 'inspired' such rhymes.

They totally failed to appreciate the dynamic nature of the nursery rhyme as part of the constantly evolving realm of children's folklore.

This antiquarian and folkloric interest was considerably bolstered by the proliferation of specialised literature for the nineteenth-century child. The result was an ever-increasing demand for verse, stories, picture books and literary amusements written for English nurseries. Newly-created verse began to augment traditional nursery rhymes and sometimes the broad community of children, as well as adults, took these newly-minted nursery rhymes to heart and gave them classic status as they moved off the printed page and into an oral tradition. Notable examples from this time include 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', 'The Spider and the Fly', 'Wee Willie Winkie', 'Mary Had a Little Lamb', 'There Was a Little Girl', 'Ten Little Nigger Boys', 'Old Mother Hubbard', 'Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Dog Gone?' and 'Higglety, Pigglety Pop!' It is principally this literary genesis, this made-to-order folklore which is examined in an Australian context in the following pages.



With the increasingly popular sentimental image of the Victorian child there came an influential reaction against the supposed violence, cruelty and coarseness of many nursery rhymes. Most of these misconceptions and prejudices are encapsulated in a significant essay published in Charles Dickens' magazine *Household Words* in 1851: 'A witch in the nursery'.<sup>6</sup> The author of this essay, Richard Henry Horne, came to Australia the very next year for an extended stay of almost eighteen years.



Unfortunately, whilst here, Horne does not appear to have recorded any local nursery verse. His journalistic interest in children's folklore was, anyway, far eclipsed by a native-born Australian who became an international authority on the fairy tale. Sydney-born Joseph Jacobs (1854–1916) was an early member of the British Folk Lore Society (founded in 1878) and edited an authoritative series of nursery literature starting with *English Fairy Tales* in 1890. Thus, while Australia had no colonial equivalent of such a nineteenth-century figure as James Halliwell it was not entirely bereft of or unconnected with a developing interest in children's folklore.

Now it has been said that 'nursery rhymes call for as little of anything in the way of introduction as would Mr. Punch, Guy Fawkes or Santa Claus at a children's party'.<sup>7</sup> Such a widely-held belief is trivialising; it presupposes the genre is worthy solely because it is time honoured and that nursery rhymes are too precious and ephemeral to admit of scrutiny and analysis. But all popular culture is subject to the vagaries of taste and fashion. Additions as well as deletions to the nursery rhyme corpus are an ongoing cultural phenomenon and, as the Opies have shown, the recipe is not lost. Australian cooks have, moreover, contributed a small serving to this feast and to that vast menagerie that includes blind mice, an amorous frog, lost sheep and a cat with a fiddle can be added Australian denizens such as leaping kangaroos, irrepressible laughing kookaburras, fearsome bunyips and clever rabbits who outsmart the dingo!

Indeed, the amusing antics of native fauna provide our most obvious nursery rhyme subject and one which has retained a perennial appeal for young Australians. However, alongside this constant are other subjects whose novelty has not been sustained: today's children may well find it difficult, if not impossible, to be as excited as their forebears over the possibility of a tram or a train ride as described in some of our nursery rhymes. Equally, some of the occupations these rhymes depict (such as butchers delivering on horseback or farmers milking by hand) or the pastimes they chronicle (such as collecting eggs from a backyard poultry run) contribute to a picture of Australian childhood past.

As a small illumination into the largely invisible terrain of Australia's history of childhood, these nursery rhymes have never attracted a like spirit to the Opies. It is more than

twenty years since Ian Turner wrote the first attempt at a definitive study of Australian children's play rhymes<sup>8</sup> and there has been a burgeoning of scholarly interest in these rhymes as well as increased validation of such research ever since.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, as wide ranging as this interest is it has not extended into the area of nursery rhymes of local origin or adaptation. Admittedly such nursery rhymes, which are elusive and seldom anthologised, are much more likely to be the product of an adult's imagination rather than a child's, yet even so their place and status in an evolving view of children's folklore in Australia should not go unacknowledged.

Ian Turner's pioneering book concluded, too hastily, that there was no independent tradition of Australian nursery rhymes<sup>10</sup> and only a few echoes of classic nursery rhymes appeared in his patient accumulation gathered from verbal sources. Certainly the contribution of Australian nursery rhymes to popular culture is less significant than that of Australian play rhymes. For the diligent researcher, however, Australian nursery rhymes can be found and may cause us to agree with the nationalistic sentiments of the *Bulletin* expressed over seventy years ago:

'Banbury Cross' and 'Dick Whittington' and 'I've been to London to see the Queen' ... are quite out of place in this land of kangaroos, rabbits and politicians ... The Australian kid has an outlook different from that of

an English kid: the sort of songs he wants to sing will not be those that the English kid sings.<sup>11</sup>



In the process of unearthing this rare vein of Australian nursery rhymes one also reveals yet another way in which Australia has sought to find its own voice, to articulate the Australian experience to its youngest members and give them a literature of their own. Furthermore, it repopulates the literary landscape, for in the process it brings minor poets to the fore and extends the contribution of acknowledged and better-known writers of verse for adults into the realm of children's literature.

It thus enables C.J. Dennis' single published volume for children to appear less like a curiosity and more of a whole with his long-term interests and literary output. It also enables us to unravel something like a literary coterie in Sydney in the early 1920s which was briefly brought together to consolidate an interest in composing Australian nursery rhymes. This interrelationship personalises and links figures who might not otherwise have been revealed to us as like thinkers. Finally, it allows one literary genre, albeit minor, to stand recorded as an inspiration for further practitioners in the ongoing process of giving young Australia its own imaginative territory.



# Chapter 1

## Nursery Rhymes in Colonial Australia

### ‘Who killed cockatoo?’

Molesworth Jeffrey, a minor mid-century literary figure in colonial Tasmania has left us a touching look at English-born parents attempting to pass on the oral tradition of their childhood to young colonials:

The Author, while sitting one Winter’s evening beside his Family-hearth, was striving to recall old Nursery rhymes. Amongst sundry antique songs that he endeavoured to vivify anew in his memory for the benefit of his Bairns, was the one commencing with ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little Star.’ But familiar as the first lines of that Composition may sound to all whose early life has been passed in England, neither the Author nor his Wife was able to recite more than the two commencing stanzas ... And so, after much vain effort of memory, it was resolved that the Author should do his best to supplement the hiatus from his own stores of versification.<sup>12</sup>

Jeffrey’s version, however, has nothing of a distinctive Australiana touch about it; the nursery rhyme becomes something akin to a hymn and sacrifices its carefree mood and innocence to a didactic moral purpose:

... Still my fellow-creatures move  
To admire the wondrous LOVE,  
That design’d you what you are—  
Beacon to the traveller!

Still all heedless mortals tell  
Of th’ illimitable SKILL,  
That uplifted you so high  
In the void immensity.

Still excite them to adore  
The eternal sovran POWER,  
That sustains you night by night,  
And replenishes your light.

Molesworth Jeffrey, [*Hashshelousho Melochim*] (1864)

And if the middle class and intellectually stimulating environment of the Jeffrey household could not reproduce the classic nursery rhymes for mid-century Australian children, how much more difficult must it have been for our founding fathers?

Part of the cargo, the imaginative cargo, which the First Fleet undoubtedly carried to Sydney Cove in 1788 was a cross-section of the folklore of the British Isles. Along with the adult verses, folk songs, bawdy ditties, proverbs, riddles and rhymes there would also have been items of nursery lore which

had begun to be codified in print from the middle of the eighteenth century. The voices of white children were raised in the Australian colonies from the very first day of settlement when almost forty children (twelve years of age or under was the contemporary definition of child) arrived. These children constituted less than four per cent of the entire contingent—a proportion which was greatly at variance with the structure of the society they had left behind.

When the first English census was taken in 1801 it was revealed that almost half the population were children—four million from a total of nine million! The First Fleeter's deviation from this norm was not significantly altered until the first fifty years of settlement had passed. Throughout the 1830s the first great influx of children arrived as part of immigrant families. In addition, by the end of this decade the native-born population were into their second generation and secure family units were becoming much more commonplace in colonial society than they had been in the past.<sup>13</sup> It should therefore not be surprising that Australia's first children's book appeared at this time and was produced to help redress the inadequate schooling facilities for this sudden burgeoning of children in the colonies.

No doubt in this largely alien environment both immigrant and convict children, like their elders, sometimes

turned for consolation to the rhymes, songs and hymns of their homeland. It is equally likely that some of this oral bounty for children would eventually have suffered a sea change and been reworked to accommodate local idiom and invention. But just when was such verse of local adaptation or even origin honoured with the permanency of print?

Local publishers last century were usually booksellers, printers and stationers first, and any publishing was very much an ancillary and minor effort. And so far as children's publishing was concerned it did not achieve mainstream status until the twentieth century: colonial publishing for children was less than an ancillary occupation and was more like an indulgence! Granted the superiority of imported printings, the small buying public locally and the dearth of Australian children's authors and illustrators, one can readily appreciate why, of the seventy or so children's books published in nineteenth-century Australia, most had the crude appearance and limited circulation of frontier printings.

The first children's book written, published and printed in Australia was Charlotte Barton's *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (1841). And perhaps the first work of verse for Australian children was Archpriest Therry's *Hymns for Children* published in Melbourne in 1846. Francis Grundy's verse narrative, *The Demon McGuire*, about the



rough and tumble effect of the demon Southerly buster on colonial Sydney appeared in 1870 and a few years later Louisa Anne Meredith presented her *Grandmamma's Verse Book for Young Australia* (1878) which was later issued in a much more elaborate and illustrated edition in London as *Waratah Rhymes for Young Australia* (1891).

In a significant 'Preface' to the London edition Louisa Anne Meredith claimed that this work was the first attempt 'to provide Australian children with simple rhymes on local subjects'. While none of these verses could be called nursery rhymes a couple of them do appropriate characters from nursery rhyme sources. These are used as a starting point for extended verse narratives with the overt didactic intention of conveying lessons on Australian natural history. Thus 'A Walk with Miss Muffet' is used to describe the habits and habitat of the trap-door spider.

Miss Muffet the lady is called,  
Whom we all understand to have squalled  
When a friendly old spider  
Dropped close down beside her:  
She *was* so amazed and appalled!

If Miss Muffet will put on her hat,  
We will go for a walk and a chat;  
Not far need we ramble,  
Nor over rocks scramble,  
Our way will be easy and flat.

I've a friend we will both call and see,  
A recluse most unsocial is he,  
Yet his fine taste in dressing  
Ne'er fails in impressing  
Us all with his grave dignity ...



He, a clever mechanic, begins  
By stretching long ropes, which he spins  
Of silk threads wove together  
In sunshiny weather,  
And so, soon a network he wins.

Of bright shining silk it is made,  
And in accurate patterns displayed  
In a trellis, whose angles  
With dewdrops, like spangles,  
Each morning at dawn are arrayed

Then, under a leaf or a flower,  
He sits in a shadowy bower,  
So patiently watching  
Those fine meshes catching  
The flies he intends to devour.



Now, my charming Miss Muffet, when next  
By a spider your temper is vexed,  
Observe him more closely,  
And do not morosely  
Run off from him, cross and perplexed.

Louisa Anne Meredith, *Waratah Rhymes for Young Australia*  
(1891)

Louisa Anne Meredith could not hold back from adding a stultifying weight of factual information about the natural world to this nursery theme and extending it over fifteen verses, with footnotes! Her didactic intent thus produced a long-winded verse whose plodding mediocrity lacks the refreshing sparseness and incantatory quality which are hallmarks of successful verse for children, let alone the nursery rhyme itself.

These are almost our sole nineteenth-century examples of published verse for young Australians and after this brief flowering the century was strangely quiet. And amongst this slight output, there are few nursery rhymes of local invention or even adaption. William Howitt who visited Australia between 1852<sup>14</sup> and 1854 left us with one rare example. In his children's book *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia* (1854) he recounts the brief tale of two birds who had built their nest just where diggers were prospecting for gold. Instead of destroying the nest they observed its daily life and were inspired to compose a slight variation on a Victorian nursery rhyme:

'Little Brown Betty lived under a pan,  
And brewed good ale for digger-men.  
Digger-men came every day,  
And little Brown Betty went hopping away.'  
William Howitt, *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia*  
(1854)

Howitt actually sailed to Australia in company with his friend Richard Henry Horne, the same Richard Horne who only the year before had written a highly significant essay on nursery rhymes for *Household Words*. Howitt's wife, Mary, was also a writer and her best-known poem, now part of classic nursery literature, had been published in 1834: "Will you

walk into my parlour?" said the Spider to the Fly'. This happy convergence of literary ability and nursery rhyme interest might have been expected to produce something significant in the Australian environment. Unfortunately all we have is this lone variation on 'Little Brown Betty' which enlivens Howitt's otherwise rather plodding text.

Another rare example of colonial adaptation of nursery rhymes is quoted in an early primary school textbook: a complaining colonial child seeks to summon fine weather using a time-honoured nursery formula with the inclusion of a local Victorian place name.

Rain, rain,  
Go to Spain,  
Never come back to Brighton again  
M.A. Pitt, *Australian Second Book* (1868)

It was also at this time, the 1860s, that the first separately published items of Australian sheet music for children were issued: significantly, these were song settings of two traditional nursery rhymes. Isaac Nathan, Australia's first major composer, set 'Hey, Diddle, Diddle' and 'Jack and Jill' to music in the early 1860s. Perhaps, like Molesworth Jeffrey, he was seeking to enshrine nursery lore in the minds of his own children. Thereafter the introduction of nursery



lore and rhymes into the musical life of colonial Australia was most frequently achieved via the pantomime. Two of Marcus Clarke's least remembered efforts were such works: *Goody Two Shoes and Little Boy Blue, or, Sing a Song of Sixpence ...* (1870) and *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star or, Harlequin Jack Frost, Little Tom Tucker and the Old Woman that Lived in a Shoe ...* (1873).



Amongst these sparse examples the most noteworthy attempt to adapt a traditional nursery rhyme to an Australian setting was a version of 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' which appeared in Adelaide about 1870 under the title *Who Killed Cockatoo?* This new rendition of a perennial nursery favourite was written by William Cawthorne and it would appear to be the first work separately published in Australia which sought to transplant such a nursery rhyme into a local setting. Cawthorne's slight pamphlet was very much a frontier printing, crudely printed and presented with little if any visual appeal for a young audience. As a novel item for an extremely limited colonial audience it must have been issued as a very small print run and most probably only circulated in Adelaide so that the eastern states were denied the pleasure of an Australian 'Cock Robin'.

William Anderson Cawthorne (1824–97) was a prominent figure in the early cultural life of colonial Adelaide. He had arrived there as an English immigrant in 1841 and at the age of seventeen opened one of its earliest schools. Apart from a brief and unsuccessful attempt at gold mining in Victoria in 1852, he continued his educational role until 1855. Thereafter, for a brief while, he established an Academy of Art and concentrated on another of his long-term

interests—the illustration of Aboriginal life and customs. Cawthorne also established a music warehouse in Adelaide and throughout his life maintained an entrepreneurial attitude to colonial opportunity.

Cawthorne was also a frequent contributor of letters, verses, short paragraphs, anthropological observations, educational views and miscellaneous prose to colonial newspapers and magazines. Amongst this minor output may well be precursors of *Who Killed Cockatoo?*—other works in the nursery rhyme format. Although anonymous, 'Australian rhymes for Australian babes' published in an Adelaide magazine in 1861 is very possibly one such item from Cawthorne's pen (a cutting of this verse is included in Cawthorne's scrapbook of personalia held by the Mitchell Library, Mss B232, p. 63). Its first verse reads:

Little Tommy Drew  
Went to Wallaroo  
To search for a mine:  
He walked by the road  
And found a big lode,  
And said, 'What a rich man am I.'  
*Anon, Bell's Life in Adelaide (May 1861)*

*Who Killed Cockatoo?* was Cawthorne's sole known published work for children. Its first part adheres quite closely to the traditional nursery version and this gives it direction and narrative structure. Unfortunately, Cawthorne augmented the work with a further eleven verses in an effort to introduce even more local colour. When he was thrown completely on his own poetic efforts and departed from the time-honoured formula, he failed to produce more than a minor Australian literary curiosity and hardly an item which might have entered the folklore of a new country.

Who Killed Cockatoo?

Part I

Who killed Cockatoo?

I, said the Mawpawk,  
With my tomahawk:  
I killed Cockatoo.

Who saw him die?

I, said the Opossum,  
From the gum-blossom:  
I saw him die.

Who caught his blood?

I, said the Lark,  
With this piece of bark:  
I caught his blood.

Who'll make his shroud?

I, said the Eagle,  
With my thread and needle:  
I'll make his shroud.

Who'll be chief mourner?

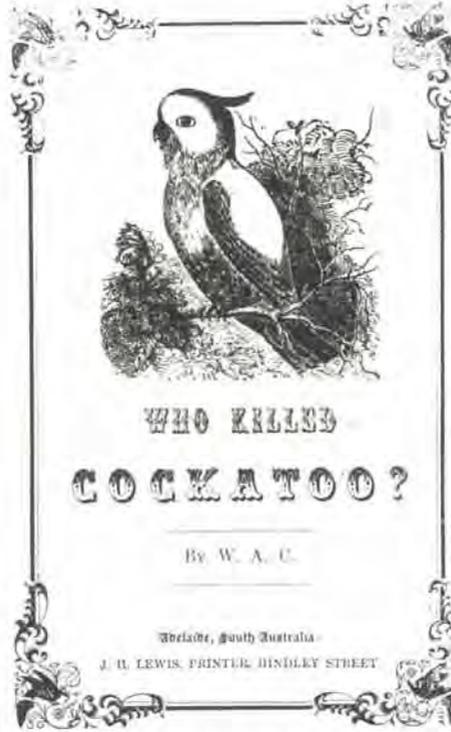
I, said the Plover,  
For I was his lover:  
I'll be chief mourner.

Who'll dig his grave?

I, said the Wombat,  
My nails for my spade:  
I'll dig his grave.

Who'll say a prayer?

I, said the Magpie,  
My best I will try:  
I'll say a prayer.



Who'll bear him to his tomb?

I, said the Platipus,  
On my back, gently, thus:  
I'll bear him to his tomb.

Who'll be the parson?

I, said the Crow,  
Solemn and slow:  
I'll be the parson.

Who'll carry the link?

I, said the Macaw,  
With my little paw:  
I'll carry the link.

Who'll chant a psalm?

I, said the Black Swan,  
I'll sing his death song:  
I'll chant a psalm.

Who'll watch in the night?

I, said the Wild Dog,  
As he crept from a log:  
I'll watch in the night.

Who'll toll the bell?

I, said the Pelican,  
Again and again:  
I'll toll the bell.

Then droop'd every head,  
And ceas'd every song,  
As onward they sped,  
All mournful along.

All join in a ring,  
With wing linking wing,  
And trilling and twittering,  
Around the grave sing:

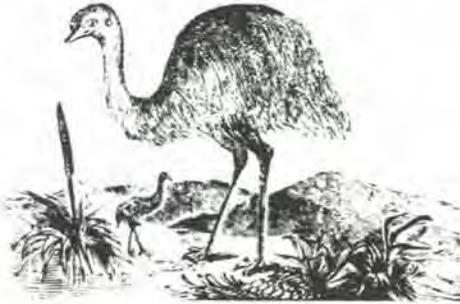
Alas! Cockatoo,  
How low dost thou lie;  
A long, sad adieu!  
A fond parting sigh!

End of part I

Part II

Then came the Wild Cat,  
And the bushy-tail Rat,  
With a squeak and a mew;  
While, in a hop,  
Up came, with a pop,  
The big Kangaroo.

The Quail, and the Rail,  
Were there without fail;  
And the pretty Blue Wren,  
With master Emu,  
And screeching Curlew,  
From a beautiful glen.



EMU.

And the bird of the Mound,  
In Murray-scrub found,  
With its eggs in a row;  
And the Parrot with crest,  
In a green and blue vest,  
As grand as a beau.

And the Lyre Bird, grand,  
That ne'er still will stand,  
Came in on tip-toe,  
And straw-colored Ibis,  
Once worshipped with Isis,  
Was present also.

And the Bronze-winged Pigeon,  
And the roly fat Widgeon,  
From hill and from dell;  
And he that doth build  
A bower well filled  
With spangle and shell.

Then flying very fast,  
Came Laughing Jackass,  
Hoo hoo hoo! ha ha ha!  
While he gobbled a snail,  
And wagged his big tail!  
Hoo hoo hoo! ha ha ha!

And the Snake, sneaking sly  
With his sharp glittering eye,  
As he searches and pries;  
And the Lizard with frill,  
Like a soldier at drill,  
That fights till he dies.

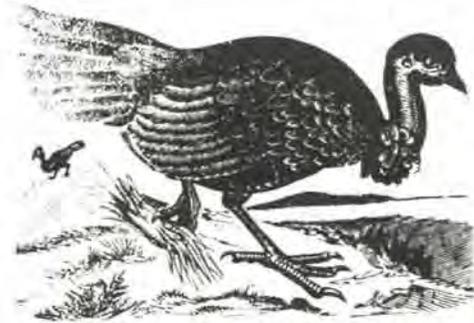
And the saucy Tom Tit,  
With his pretty 'twit twit,'  
And his tail in the air;  
And the wary quick Snipe,  
With a bill like a pipe,  
Hopping hither and there.

O wicked Mawpawk!  
We'll have you caught,  
For the deed you have done;  
We'll slyly creep  
When you're fast asleep,  
And break your bones ev'ry one.

'Yes Yes,' said the Hawk,  
And the bird that can talk,  
'We'll strike off his head.'  
'Ah, Ah,' said the Owl,  
'By fish, flesh and fowl,  
'We'll bang! shoot him dead.'

So they all flew away,  
And still fly to this day,  
O'er hill and o'er plain;  
But he dives in the rushes,  
And hides under bushes,  
And they search but in vain.

William Anderson Cawthorne,  
*Who Killed Cockatoo?* (1870)



NATIVE PHEASANT.



Early attempts to provide indigenous literature for Australian children were often frustrated by the great wealth of imported printings from England. The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a huge proliferation of picture books, nursery text and printed amusements all of which were as eagerly appropriated into Australian nurseries as into their English counterparts. Traditional nursery rhymes appeared in many formats and enterprising British publishers used technical advances in colour printing to present lavish editions illustrated by Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott and a host of lesser known figures.

These collections were internationally popular and appeared in Australian bookshops within a short time of their London issue. Amongst these is one work with the promising title of *Young Australia's Nursery Rhymes* (c.1891). Disappointingly, this is completely Anglophile in its choice of rhymes and its illustrations are weak imitations of Kate Greenaway's work. In actual fact the book was simply a reissue of a London imprint, *Young England's Nursery Rhymes* (1890), with no more than an altered title to tempt an Australian audience. Yet even so, such a change of title at least marks an awareness that a nationalistic appeal was beginning to be an asset for this particular foreign market.



One of the earliest formats for nursery verse and certainly one of the most popular nursery items in the second half of the nineteenth century was the rhyming alphabet. The *Opies' Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* actually opens with five rhyming



alphabets including 'A Apple Pie' which dates from the seventeenth century and has retained its popularity in the nursery to the present day. Although no-one was tempted to acclimatise 'A Apple Pie' into Australian culinary terms, alphabets were produced whose localisations made them culture specific for Australia. Such alphabets were the major colonial contribution to nursery literature.

The first known example to be published here was *The Australian Alphabet of Natural History* issued in Sydney in 1857. Unfortunately, its existence is only known from advertisements—no actual copy appears to have survived. Further Australian examples began to appear as more than isolated curiosities during what was surely the heyday of alphabet composition and illustration: in Victorian England between 1865 and 1875, Walter Crane alone illustrated six major alphabet books and his pre-eminence was only somewhat checked a decade later by Kate Greenaway's version of *A Apple Pie* in 1886. The example of Crane and his English contemporaries in popularising the alphabet book as an

**A** for Australia,  
the land of my birth  
**a**

Australia is a land of worth,  
It is the brightest spot on earth;  
Where children play the whole day long,  
Quite happy in their dance and song.



**J** is the Jackass,  
who laughs  
**j** all the day

The children all like him when they are at play;  
He always is merry, happy and bright,  
For laughing will make every trouble seem light.



**K** is the dear old  
Kangaroo  
**k**

Who will always be glad to welcome you;  
He hops, skips, and jumps, trying to please,  
For he knows you are kind, and never would tease.



indispensable nursery item was not lost on Australian publishers and was certainly the inspiration to the Melbourne firm of Samuel and William Calvert who produced two such works in the 1870s: *The Young Australian's Alphabet* and *The Australian ABC Book*.

Both these alphabets display the typographical style and layout common to much popular printing of the late nineteenth century: the dominant capital letters and solidly blocked text are coupled with vignette illustrations, often crudely coloured. Both alphabet books were proudly displayed by the Calvert brothers at the (Melbourne) Intercolonial Exhibition of 1875 and attracted favourable comment from the judges:

The specimens of Picture Books, intended for Australian children, designed and printed in colours by William Calvert are very good, both in drawing and in execution, and further deserve commendation as an attempt to familiarize Australian children with the natural history and surroundings of their colonial home.<sup>15</sup>

The judges' concluding comments held the most truth: these alphabets owed their success to their indigenous content which was a considerable novelty in its day. In actual fact they could not sustain comparison with the best of their English counterparts. *The Young Australian's Alphabet* contains uninspired illustrations and trite, awkward verse. Only the cover is eye-catching and shows evidence of illustrative and design skills together with typographical inventiveness.

Even so, these alphabets had widespread colonial appeal and their circulation was certainly much greater than Cawthorne's nursery novelty of the same decade. Together with E.W. Cole's 'Kindergarten Cyclopaedia' series of the 1890s, alphabets were the most popular and widely seen nursery literature locally produced for colonial children. Cole's printings, however, were scrapbook style accumulations of verse, puzzles, short stories and illustrations culled from an anonymous range of English printed sources. Unlike the Calverts, Cole neither commissioned new work on the local scene nor devoted any significant attention to Australiana.

T W I N K L E , T W I N K L E , S O U T H E R N C R O S S



A for AUSTRALIA  
Which I am told,  
Is famous for Corn,  
For Wool and for Gold.

B is the BLACK-FELLOW  
You can now see,  
Lazily sleeping  
Under a tree.

C is a COCKATOO  
With a gay crest,  
He chatters and thinks he is  
One of the best.

D for the DIGGERS  
Who busily seek,  
For Gold and for Jewels  
Down by the creek.

E is for EMU  
Which runs very fast,  
But Black-fellow spears him  
And kills him at last.

F for the FISHES  
That swim in the sea,  
But Chinamen catch them  
And sell them to me.

G stands for GUM-TREE  
Which you must learn,  
Men cut into firewood  
Ready to burn.

H is the HOLIDAY  
We can all spend,  
In having a pic-nic  
With a kind friend.

I stands for ISLAND  
All rocky and steep,  
Where ships have been wrecked  
In the boisterous deep.

J is for JACKASS,  
A very strange bird,  
Whose laugh in the forest  
Is very absurd.

K is the letter that  
Makes KANGAROO,  
He can jump over me  
And then over you.

L is the LIZARD—  
With quickness and ease,  
He runs over rocks  
And up the high trees.

M is for MINING—  
In danger and damp,  
Men dig out the gold  
By the light of a lamp.

N for NEW ZEALAND;  
I'm sorry to say,  
The Settlers are driving  
The Maories away.

O for OPOSSUM  
Which now you can see,  
Against the full moon  
on the branch of a tree.

P stands for PARROT  
With feathers so gay,  
Who tries to repeat  
All the words that we say.

Q is the QUARTZ  
Where Gold does abound,  
And

R the RICH REEF  
In which it is found.

S is the SNAKE—  
For its bite you must note,  
The Doctors can really  
Find no antidote.

T for the TELEGRAPH,  
Clever men use,  
For sending so quickly  
The best of the news.

U is UNKNOWN,  
And 'tis really the truth,  
Too much is unknown  
To Australian youth.

V for VELOCIPEDA  
Some people ride,  
With wheels and with treddles  
And handle to guide.

W the WATTLE,  
An elegant tree,  
With gum and rich blossoms  
So pleasant to see.

X stands for TEN, it is also the sign  
I use for a X if you write a bad line.

Y is the YARRA,  
And Yarra means flowing,  
Where people take pleasure,  
In fishing and rowing.

Z the last letter  
And like the low Sun,  
We've got to the finish  
Of what we begun.

*The Young Australian's Alphabet*  
(c.1871)

## Chapter 2

# Songs for the Nursery

### ‘Kookooburra, kookooburra, sitting on a gum tree’

Just before the end of the century the Australian poet Victor Daley, writing in the *Bulletin*, lamented the lack of ‘Australian child-literature of song and story that will supersede the old nursery favorites with their Northern color and Northern ideality’.<sup>16</sup> Although Daley’s first volume of verse was published the same year that he made this comment, he did not attempt to rectify this national lacunae in his own verse. His only discovery was a local play rhyme in popular use in turn-of-the-century Sydney published in the *Bulletin* in 1898:

‘Johnny and Jane and Jack and Lou;  
Butler’s Stairs through Woolloomooloo;  
Woolloomooloo, and ’cross the Domain,  
Round the Block, and home again!  
Heigh, ho! tipsy toe,  
Give us a kiss and away we go.’  
Anon, [‘Johnny and Jane’], *Bulletin* (12 March 1898)

Perhaps the one person at the time who could have answered Daley’s challenge, the one person who was most capable and comfortable with the small scale, the bizarre humour and the incantatory pace of verse suitable for a nursery audience was Ethel Turner. She edited the children’s page of the *Australian Town and Country Journal* in the 1890s

and *Gum Leaves*, her ninth book, was culled from its contributions. This was actually the first of her books to be published in Australia.

It was in this last decade of the nineteenth century that children’s book publishing in Australia began to develop as more than a sporadic occurrence. If we exclude E.W. Cole’s numerous part publications of the 1890s from our survey, almost the same number (about thirty-five) of imaginative children’s books were published in Australia between 1841 and 1890 as there were in the single decade of the 1890s themselves. Furthermore, the quality of production and the tentative introduction of colour printing marked the 1890s printings as valid attempts to compete with their imported counterparts. This competition was also energised by the emergence of a discernible colonial pride in local achievement: Australian writing and illustrating for Australian children presented in locally produced books. And a work like Ethel Turner’s *Gum Leaves* (1900) was certainly worthy of acclaim and pride.

Among the miscellany of items in Turner’s book were five short verses which provide a link between the nursery literature of colonial days and that of the new century:



Hey, diddle, diddle! The cat and the fiddle  
 Are getting old-fashioned, I trow;  
 More novel 'twould be for a great wallaby  
 The organ to play with one toe.

For the moon to give chase to the man on her face,  
 And the comet to join in the fun;  
 For the evergreen rabbit to weep at the habit  
 Of squatters infesting its run.

For the novelist pale to yield up his tale  
 To the sheep of Bo-peep's woeful verse;  
 For the ghost of the corner to sit on Jack Horner  
 While Coroner Cats seek a hearse.

For small dogs to giggle when cows give a wriggle,  
 That lands them away past the moon,  
 Is really quite stale, as is also the tale  
 Of the dish making off with that spoon.

Now, not to make off with a spoon when there's moon,  
 Is a far more astonishing thing;  
 And to see the moon wriggle—oh, hey, diddle, diddle,  
 In that case you really might sing.

Ethel Turner, *Gum Leaves* (1900)

## There Was an Old Man



## Au Revoir

Solomon Simon met a snake,  
 He passed the time of day,  
 'And next time you're not wide awake,  
 Just send me word I pray.'

'I'm sleeping now,' the snake replied,  
 And curled up in a hurry.  
 Said Simon, 'Glad to hear it friend,  
 Sweet dreams, but I must scurry.'

Ethel Turner, *Gum Leaves* (1900)

## Mary Had

Mary had a little shark,  
Its teeth were pearly white.  
She said, 'Alas! it cannot bark,  
Though, bless me, can't it bite.

'To keep the burglars bold away  
Each night we turn it loose;  
But it can't run as fast as they,  
And isn't any use.

'But stay,' she cried, and clapped her hand,  
And started off to run,  
'I'll take it to a dog-fish, and  
'Twill learn to bark like fun.'

Ethel Turner, *Gum Leaves* (1900)



## My Pet

Have you seen the cat of Dorothy  
Lee?  
The one she calls her Catty-Puss?  
If she's proud of her pet, then what  
should I be?

I've got a duck-billed Platypus.  
Ethel Turner, *Gum Leaves* (1900)



It would seem that only after there was an appreciation of and a growing demand for adult Australian literature, could there be a corresponding and fruitful regard for locally written children's literature as well. Although Angus & Robertson, who were to become Australia's best-known publishers of children's books, had issued their first such title in 1896 (Louise Mack's *Teens*), the regular appearance of children's books and the establishment of a stable of children's authors and illustrators did not begin until 1918. In that year we welcomed *The Magic Pudding* and *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot* and soon conferred classic status on them.

Australian children's literature is therefore almost exclusively a product of the twentieth century and received considerable impetus from frequent statements made around the turn of the century advocating a national literature for our children. In terms of verse, that demand was met most effectively during this period through the composition of children's songs. One of the earliest statements in this direction was voiced in the 'Preface' to Edith Walker's *Song Stories of Australia for Little People* (c.1905):

It was possible to obtain many books of children's songs, but these were mostly of English, American and German authorship, and it was necessary to change and adapt words in most of the songs contained in them before they could be used. There was none among them which could tell the story of ... our own far Southern Land ...

In the schools, too, there is a rapidly increasing demand for songs which shall have a special significance for Australian children ... It is through the medium of such songs that the spirit of patriotism may receive its first stimulus ...

So far there has been but little attempted here in this direction, and the Australian Child-World is lacking in that which will surely become one of its greatest sources of inspiration and development.



Of all the song books for children, those which enjoyed the most widespread popularity date from this period and were a trilogy issued between 1907 and 1913: *Australian Songs for Young and Old*, *Bush Songs of Australia for Young and Old* and *More Australian Songs for Young and Old*.<sup>17</sup> Some of these songs permeated Australian culture to such an extent that they remained current in school and nursery life until at least the early 1960s. There was hardly a child in the school system before this who could not join in with two particular national favourites from *Bush Songs* (1910): 'Kangaroo' and 'Kookooburra'.

## Kangaroo Song

Old Bumpety Jumpety Hop and Go One  
Was lying at ease on his side in the sun,  
And this old Kangaroo, he was whisking the flies  
With his glossy long tail from his coat and his eyes.

Bumpety Jumpety Hop and Go One,  
Hop and Go One, Hop and Go One,  
Sleep with an eye open out in the sun,  
Bumpety Jumpety Hop.

He was wild in his youth was this old Kangaroo,  
And learnt from experience all that he knew.  
He could tackle a rabbit's pack, one and all,  
For they often had hunted him, when he was small.  
Bumpety Jumpety, etc.

Now foolish young Frisky, the woodcutter's dog,  
Came peeping at Bumpety over a log,  
So it's 'Up, Boys, and at 'im!' he barked to the pack,  
And 'Right! we are coming!' the others barked back.  
Bumpety Jumpety, etc.

I wish you had seen how old Bumpety stood  
And boxed all their ears in the heart of the wood!  
And he hopped off in triumph as soon as he'd done,—  
So we'll all cry 'Hurroosha!' for Hop and Go One!  
Bumpety Jumpety, etc.

Annie R. Rentoul, *Bush Songs of Australia for Young and Old* (1910)

## Kookooburra (The Laughing Jackass)

Kookooburra, Kookooburra, sitting on a gum tree,  
High among the branches, up tip-top,



When a lizard passes, rustling in the grasses,  
Down you pounce and catch him,  
flip, flap, flop!

Chorus—(after each verse)

Kook-kook, Kook-kook! Then you chuckle gaily,  
Laugh your merry laughter, ha-ha, hoo-hoo, hoo,  
Ha-ha, hoo-hoo, ha-ha, hoo-hoo, ha-ha, hoo-hoo, ha-ha!  
Till you make our sides ache laughing at *you!*

Kookooburra, Kookooburra, with your eyes of amber  
Underneath a top-knot soft and gray,  
Fluffety and funny, sweet as baby bunny,  
When we want to talk, you fly away!

Kookooburra, Kookooburra, little soft blue feathers  
Grow along your jacket round each wing!  
When we think you sleeping, often we come peeping

Down below the gum-boughs, where you swing.

Kookooburra, Kookooburra, we got bushed at sundown!

Snakes and skeeturs scared us all around!

Then you came and sought us, laughing till you brought us  
To the dear home-paddock safe and sound!

Annie R. Rentoul, *Bush Songs of Australia for Young  
and Old* (1910)

So widespread and timeless has the appeal of these nursery songs been, so enshrined are they in our national consciousness that they can be said to have reached folklore status.

Indeed, 'Kookooburra' was so much a part of national childhood that it has received the final accolade: school children appropriated it into their oral folklore by adding rude rhymes to its basic format. Reminiscences of a World War I childhood included class singing in school:

Class singing was the last thing of Friday ...

There was the kookaburra song, and in the first stanza  
we could use all the shocking words which we would  
never use at any other time.

Kookaburra, Kookaburra, [Cook you bugger, Cook  
you bugger,]

S[h]its in an old gum tree

Until a lizard passes,

Rustling through the gr[arses].<sup>18</sup>

In these pre-war years the Calverts' alphabets of the 1870s were not forgotten and two outstanding examples were published, both in 1905. Today they are extremely rare and virtually unknown but both are notable Australiana items which relied on local content for their inspiration: *The ABC Book of Beasts and Birds and What I Saw at the Melbourne Zoo* (1905) and *The*

SONGS FOR THE NURSERY

*Australian Alphabet* by Hugh McCrae (1905<sup>19</sup>). In quality of presentation and wit both works maintained the standards set by *Gum Leaves*. In particular, Norman Carter's illustrations to *The*

*Australian Alphabet*, black and white illustrations dramatically highlighted by the economic use of burnt umber, created a 'striking book which has been unduly neglected'.<sup>20</sup>

A stands for Aboriginal;  
The settler out back  
Were wise to avoid him  
Or things will look 'black'

B stands for Bullock  
Just released from his load  
Which he pulled all the day  
On the hot dusty road

C stands for Camp  
What a flutter of flames  
Here's George telling Jack  
What Joe did to James

D stands for Drought  
Here a poor thirsty horse  
Has died in the bed  
Of a dried water course

E stands for Emu  
With wonderful legs  
Who'd think that they ever  
Were folded in eggs

F stands for Farmer  
A jolly old buck  
Complacently smiling  
Whatever his luck

G stands for Gonyah  
Made of bark from the logs  
What a time the poor tribesmen  
Must have with the dogs

H stands for Homestead  
A view from the back  
With Sir Drake in the foreground  
And dear Lady Quack

I is Iguana  
A beauty unsung  
He catches the flies  
For his tea, on his tongue

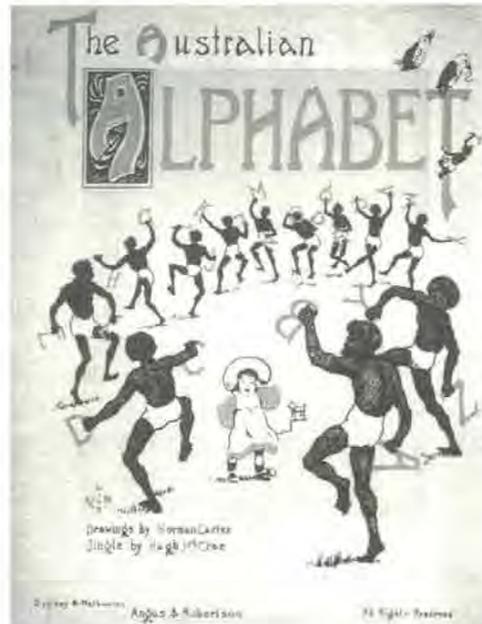
J stands for Jackass.  
Adept in guile  
Who entices the snakes  
With his sweet happy smile

K stands for Kangaroo  
As swift as the gale  
There's a price on his head  
For the soup in his tail

L is for Lyrebird  
Don't you think it a shame  
To call the poor thing  
Such a horrible name

M stands for Musterer  
Now you'll know soon  
Why the cow in the fable  
Jumped over the moon

N is for Nulla  
A terrible club  
Which the blackfellows use  
When they fight in the scrub



O is O'Possum  
Of Irish descent  
Who hangs by his tail  
To the top of his bent

P stands for Prospector  
Whose joy is untold  
When he finds in his cradle  
A nugget of Gold

Q stands for Quail  
Which the 'Townies' pursue  
Tho' the dogs head the list  
Of the total 'Battue'

R stands for Rabbit  
Which a happy device  
Has turned from a pest  
To a profit (on ice)

S is for Sundowner  
Who hangs round the run  
Till the West is aglow  
With the evening sun

T is for Tracker  
A wonderful man  
Who can tell by a twig  
Where the fugitive ran



U stands for Union  
The shearers support  
Blacklegs need quicklegs  
To escape being caught

V stands for Valentine  
Percy de Gappy  
Whose whole conversation is  
'Bai Jove old chappy'

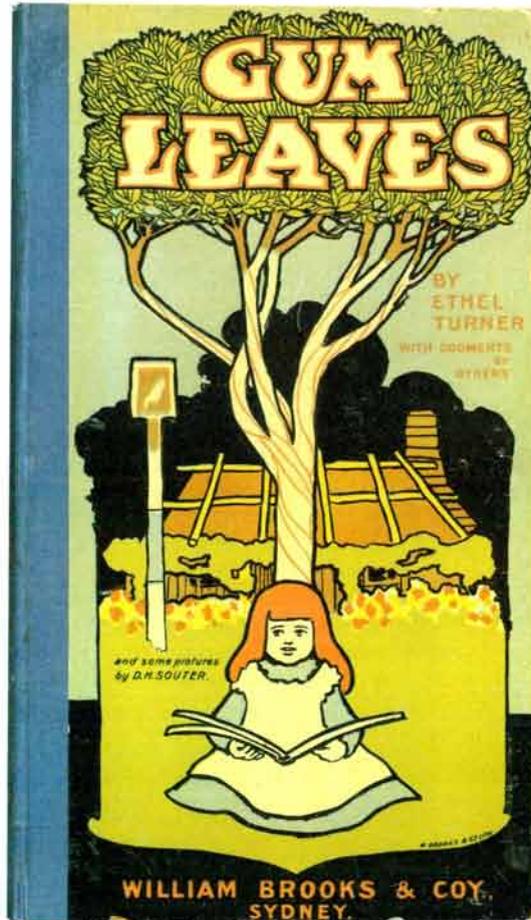
W stands for Wombat  
It's true, but it's droll  
When he's not up on top  
He's down in a hole

X is the Xstacy  
The camera-fiend feels  
When he gets a good snap  
Of the Bunyip at meals

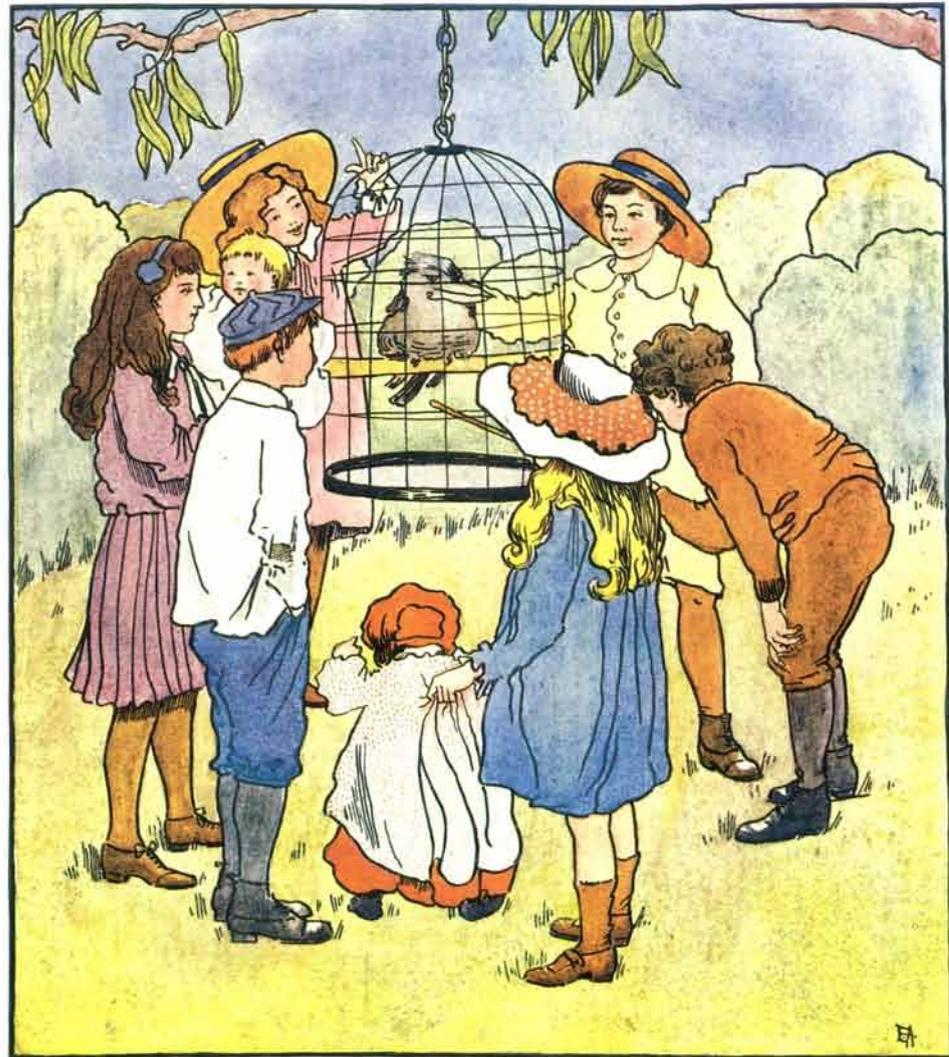
Y stands for Yarraman  
Just count and you'll find  
He has forelegs in front  
And two legs behind

Z is for Zebra  
[Of course it's a failure]  
It's an animal not yet  
Found in Australia

Hugh McCrae, *The Australian  
Alphabet* (1905)



*Gum Leaves* (1900) was the first book of Ethel Turner's to be published in Australia and included a number of short verses inspired by nursery lore.

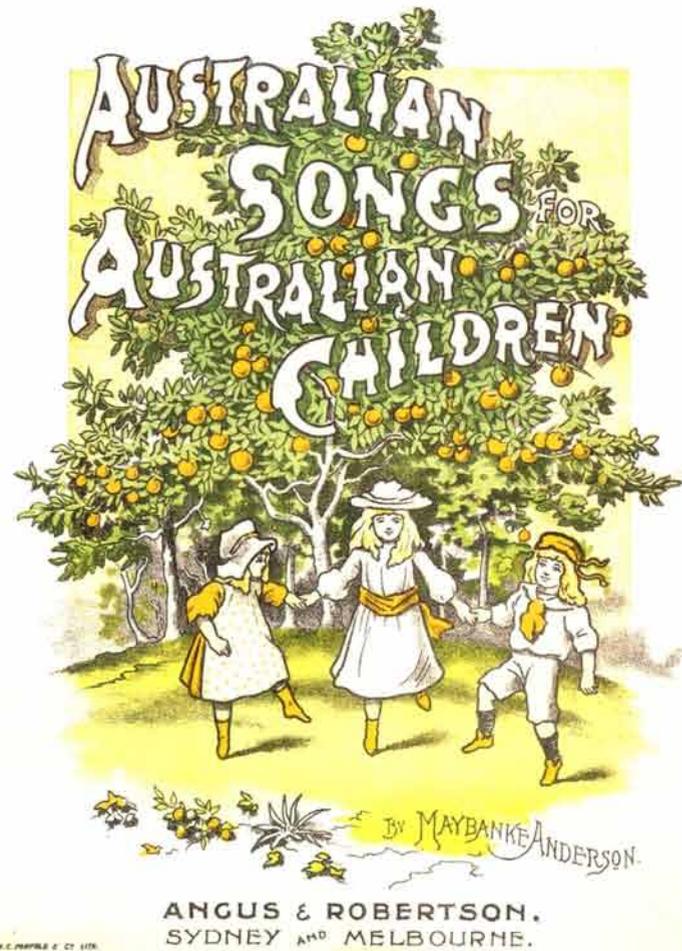
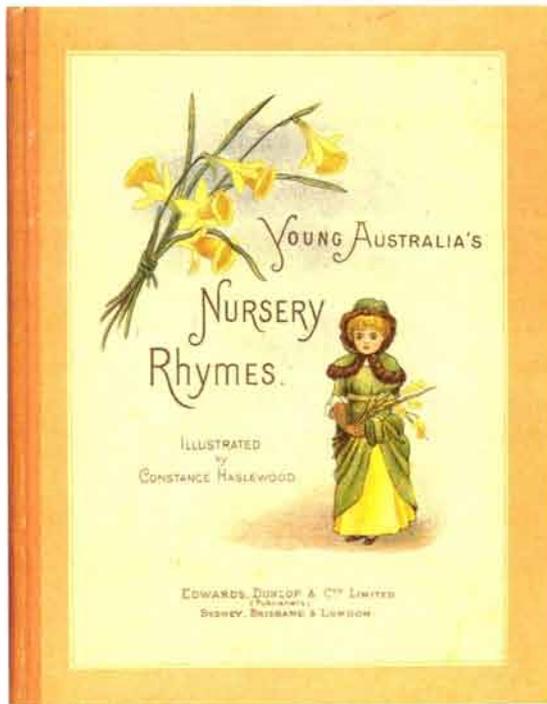


'The Jackass' by Edith Alsop from *Some Children's Songs* (1910). Songbooks of this time were striving to offer nationalistic inspiration and colour to Australian children who were more familiar with imported British culture. Like the kookaburra in the cage, the local product would have been regarded as a curiosity!



MARY HAD A LITTLE MUG  
SHE FILLED IT VERY FULL  
OF WILLSMERE MILK  
AND NOW AND THEN  
SHE WENT AND HAD A PULL.

THE WILLSMERE CERTIFIED MILK CO TEL 2911.



Top left: Advertising postcard illustrated by Rodney Alsop (c.1905).

Left: *Young Australia's Nursery Rhymes* (c.1891) is actually a reissue of *Young England's Nursery Rhymes* (1890), a clever marketing exercise with no local contribution at all!

Above: The patriotic impetus to Federation was even felt in the realm of Australian children's literature, and songbooks like this example from 1902 offered an appealing local repertoire.

## Chapter 3

# What Rhymes with ‘Bunyip’?

### ‘When the drought breaks the rabbits will come’

During this same period, at the beginning of the twentieth century, some scattered whispers of local nursery rhymes began to be heard, contributing to what was to become a more confident voice in the post-war years. Thus in 1908, quite without precedent or preamble, the *Bulletin* published six ‘Australian nursery rhymes’ by E.R.<sup>21</sup> All were variations on traditional rhymes with localisations to make them culture specific to Australia:

Goosey Goosey Gander,  
Whither do you wander?  
Your place is in the poultry yard  
And not on the verandah.  
E.R., ‘Australian nursery rhymes’, *Bulletin* (5 November 1908)

I had a little pony,  
His name was Dapple Gray.  
I sent him down to Melbourne,  
To win the Cup one day.

He couldn’t beat Poseidon,  
For Poseidon’s hard to beat.  
And now he pulls a hansom cab  
Along a Sydney street.  
E.R., ‘Australian nursery rhymes’, *Bulletin* (5 November 1908)

Little Miss Muffet  
Arose from her tuffet  
To box with the old kangaroo.  
There came a big wombat  
To join in the combat,  
And little Miss Muffet withdrew.  
E.R., ‘Australian nursery rhymes’, *Bulletin* (5 November 1908)

Little Boy Blue, your whip come and crack,  
And go to the paddock to bring the cows back.  
Where is the maid with her milking pail?  
Oh, we use machines, and they milk without fail.  
E.R., ‘Australian nursery rhymes’, *Bulletin* (5 November 1908)

Hush-a-bye baby, on the tree top,  
Grasshoppers ate up the whole of our crop.  
When the drought breaks the rabbits will come.  
Hush-a-bye baby, the outlook is glum.  
E.R., ‘Australian nursery rhymes’, *Bulletin* (5 November 1908)

Ding dong dell,  
Pussy’s in the well,  
’Twas all the water we had got,  
And now we’ll have to waste the lot.  
E.R., ‘Australian nursery rhymes’, *Bulletin* (5 November 1908)

Ever since its inception in 1880 the *Bulletin* had promoted Australian folk culture in terms of narrative ballads, bush humour and tall stories. Furthermore, its critical forum, the 'Red Page', was prepared to promote and review writing for Australian children, as well as adult literature. The depth of such enthusiasm and encouragement and the Page's wide-ranging coverage is shown by its comment on something as ephemeral as a school magazine:

There's a very urgent need for someone to arise and shout the word *Australia* in the collective ear of the varlets who run the State School Magazine of N.S.W. They are doing much harm to Australian writers by virtually *training* every kiddy from Hungerford to Albury in the belief that his (and her) country is so drought-stricken in letters that it has to loaf on other lands for literary pabulum.<sup>22</sup>

This is an example chosen from many which also serves to place the promotion of something as esoteric as Australian nursery rhymes as a less unexpected occurrence and in line with discernible editorial policy.



The accolade of having such verse featured in the *Bulletin* in 1908 did not inspire a sustained interest in Australian nursery rhymes. One isolated plea for indigenous nursery rhymes was voiced in 1912 by a little-known poet, George Herbert Gibson in his *Ironbark Splinters from the Australian Bush*. In a section headed 'Nursery rhymes for infant pastoralists', Gibson made an eloquent, if somewhat tongue in cheek, demand for an Australian contribution:

The present writer has often deplored the scarcity of really suitable books for Australian children—both prose and verse—and, with regard to the latter, especially, he has observed that the talented authors of 'Old Mother Hubbard', and 'Sing a Song of Sixpence', etc., have in modern times had but few and exceedingly feeble successors. He has, therefore, sought in a humble way to supply what may be truthfully described as a long-felt want, and, taking the classic nursery rhymes of our childhood as a model or basis, he has endeavoured to adapt them to the requirements of the present age and a pastoral country: also, while striving to preserve the purity of thought, and high moral tone which characterise such classical masterpieces as 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep', an effort has been made to beguile the infant mind with realistic situations, and local colour, in artful combination with elementary information about finance and station management.<sup>23</sup>

George Herbert Gibson (1846–1921) emigrated to New South Wales in his twenties. After some work in the outback he joined the Department of Lands in 1876 and retired from there in 1915 as an Inspector. In this capacity he travelled widely throughout the state and gained first-hand knowledge of sheep and cattle stations and of bush life generally. All this experience informs his usually light-hearted and lively ballads which were very popular in his lifetime. Gibson's last book was his 1912 volume of poems in which his adoption of the nursery rhyme format added an arresting and different note to his more usual choice of extended and narrative verse forms.

These rather bleak little rhymes are certainly aimed more at an adult audience than infant Australians, and much of

their effect and impact obviously depends on the evocative expectations which would be aroused in adult readers and then confounded by the stark and cynical truth of their sentiments.

See, saw, process of law,  
The station must have a new master;  
This one makes but a penny a day  
'Cos wool won't grow any faster.  
G. Herbert Gibson, *Ironbark Splinters from  
the Australian Bush* (1912)

Hicketty, spicketty (same old wheeze),  
Sheep grew wool for mortgagees.  
Mortgagees came every day:  
They grew rich, while I grew—grey!  
G. Herbert Gibson, *Ironbark Splinters from  
the Australian Bush* (1912)

Baa, baa, black sheep,  
Have you any wool?  
Yes, sir, oh yes, sir! three bales full.  
One for the master, who grows so lean and lank;  
None for the mistress,  
But *two* for the Bank!  
G. Herbert Gibson, *Ironbark Splinters from  
the Australian Bush* (1912)

Simple Simon met a dry man  
On a saltbush plain;  
Said Simple Simon to the dry man,  
'D'jer think it's goin' ter rain?'  
Said the dry man to Simple Simon,  
'Though the sky is o'ercast,  
P'r'aps it will, an' p'r'aps it won't,  
An' that's my bloomin' forecast!'  
G. Herbert Gibson, *Ironbark Splinters from  
the Australian Bush* (1912)

Sing a song of saltbush,  
Sandy-blight an' drought,  
Forty thousand weaners  
Slowly pegging out.

Start 'em on the stock-route,  
Brand 'em with a 'T';  
Isn't that a pretty sight  
To show a mortgagee?

Squatter king in sheep-yard  
Counting out his stock;  
Missus down in Sydney  
Doin' of 'the block.'

All the station blacks say,  
'Boss, it's plurry hot!'  
'Long comes the mortgagee,  
An' cops the bloomin' lot!

G. Herbert Gibson, *Ironbark Splinters from  
the Australian Bush* (1912)



On the eve of World War I, a significant volume of brief essays appeared in Sydney written by Donald E. Fraser, Inspector of Schools for the Public Instruction Department.<sup>24</sup> Fraser (1864–1918) was a popular, if minor, contributor to the *Bulletin* and other papers where he wrote under the pseudonym Jimmie Pannikin. His collected essays had attracted widespread attention when they first appeared in *The Australian Worker*.

Fraser was one of the earliest and most persistent advocates for a significant Australian content in the school curriculum. He also voiced a pioneering plea for a

reassessment and a reinvigoration of the place of folklore in the lives of Australian children:

Australian fairy tales and Australian folk-lore do not get sufficient attention in our schools; yet there is good native-born material ready to hand.<sup>25</sup>

Fraser has never been given the credit he deserves for his campaign against a trivialising attitude to the interests and conditions of Australian child-life earlier this century. He saw value in the culture of young Australia and advocated a consistent patriotic sentiment that permeated all aspects of national life and not merely the realm of childhood:

If ye really wish to cultivate a healthy, vigorous Australian sentiment in our schools ... it is not enough that we should preach and teach patriotism. We must practise it persistently and intelligently, by helping, as best we may, all that makes for the encouragement and growth of Australian ideas, Australian literature, Australian Science, Australian manufactures and inventions, all Australian life and labor and living.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately Fraser's voice was understandably lost in the hubbub of a nation going to war and adopting urgent new priorities. His early death in April 1918 removed someone whose proselytising interest in all things Australian would have been aroused by the unparalleled range of children's literature, verse and nursery rhyme which appeared from Christmas 1918 and through into the early 1920s.

*The Australian Worker* provided a forum for Fraser's pioneering support of Australian children's folklore and literature and their publication of his collected essays in 1914

may have encouraged another contributor to the same paper to follow suit. Mary Gilmore, in her 'Women's Page' of that paper, tried to encourage readers to send in children's play rhymes. The poor response, however, resulted in only one memorable Australian example:

Kangaroo and wallabee,  
Hopping o'er the mountain free;  
Paddy-melon not too slow,  
One, two, three, and out you go.

Anon, *The Australian Worker* (1 October 1914)

In desperation, thereafter, Mary Gilmore turned to reprinting traditional English nursery rhymes in the next few issues.<sup>27</sup>

In November 1917, the first significant twentieth-century volume of Australian 'kiddie songs' for children appeared: Furnley Maurice's *The Bay and Padie Book: Kiddie Songs*. The work was reprinted five times over the next thirty years, yet today its appeal has quite faded. Its overly sentimental verse which sometimes descends into baby talk contains little memorable nursery verse. One of the few exceptions is the first stanza of Maurice's 'Sleep Song':

Half-past bunny-time,  
'Possums by the moon;  
Tea and bread-and-honey time,  
Sleep-time soon.

Furnley Maurice, *The Bay and Padie Book* (1917)

The poet's most renowned use of the nursery rhyme format actually occurs in a powerful adult poem, 'Nursery Rhyme', published three years later:

One year, two year, three year, four,  
Comes a khaki gentleman knocking at the door;  
Any little boys at home? Send them out to me,

To train them and brain them in battles yet to be,  
 Five year, six year, seven year, eight,  
 Hurry up, you little chaps, the captain's at the gate ...  
 Furnley Maurice, *Eyes of Vigilance* (1920)

Apart from George H. Gibson's bleak and uncompromising nursery rhymes of 1912 there are very few Australian examples which depict the rigours, as opposed to the sentimentalities, of rural life. Nineteenth-century Victorian strictures against the common touch and cruelty in nursery rhymes deprived a young audience of much that it enjoys and left it in an expurgated imaginative territory. Most Australian writers of nursery rhymes have tended to accept this circumscribed realm and although the rural experience provides the prime inspiration for our nursery rhymes it is a vision almost entirely bereft of the cruel realities our bush poets captured last century (an imbalance that still persists today).

One of the very few exceptions appeared in 1917: Thomas Gunn's *Nursery Rhymes*. Like Gibson, Thomas Gunn (1873–1950) had direct experience of life on the land—he was a grazier in the Maranoa District and knew at first hand the arbitrary nature of rural life. His nursery rhyme 'Old Black Crow' captures this feeling and presents it in a stark verse with the appropriate feel of an old ballad:

Car, car, car, car, old black crow,  
 Where do you fly to when you go?  
 Where do you fly to past the trees?  
 Car, car, black crow, tell me please.

Car, car, nuby old black crow,  
 Do you pick eyes out where you go?  
 Do you pick eyes out, you black brute?  
 Car 'No' quickly, or I'll shoot.  
 Thomas Gunn, *Nursery Rhymes* (1917)

Gunn's slight pamphlet of thirteen Australian nursery rhymes is perhaps the first separate local printing in this genre since *Who Killed Cockatoo?* appeared almost fifty years earlier. In the intervening years, while young colonials had been well served by a plethora of imported printings of traditional English nursery rhymes, any indigenous touch had not been honoured with a published format beyond the pages of our daily press. Gunn's pioneering collection was augmented with a further eleven verses and published in 1920 as *Bush Nursery Rhymes*.

Give a nice little root to the bandicoot,  
 To the 'possum a sweet gum tree,  
 And grass will do for the kangaroo,  
 But bread and milk for me.  
 Thomas Gunn, *Nursery Rhymes* (1917)

### The Old Black Hen

'Cac, cac, cackle,' said the old black hen,  
 'I've laid an egg, and it's one in ten;  
 Where I have laid it nobody knows,  
 But it's safely hid from the bad black crows.'  
 'Cac, cac, cackle,' said the old black hen,  
 'I've laid an egg, and it's one in ten.'  
 Thomas Gunn, *Nursery Rhymes* (1917)

### Toast for Tommy

Toast for Tommy, and toast for tea,  
 Toast for Winnie, and toast for me,  
 Toast for Flora, and toast for Mum,  
 Toast the bread and we'll all have some.  
 Thomas Gunn, *Bush Nursery Rhymes* (1920)

In looking back over twenty years of scattered contributions of Australian nursery rhymes, it is apparent that



there was a slight but growing demand for this genre: from the first intimations of folkloric interest in Australian children appearing in the *Bulletin* of 1898 (the beginning of indigenous nursery songs), the *Bulletin's* further interest in E.R.'s nursery rhymes of 1908, the application of the nursery rhyme format to adult verse by George Gibson in 1912, the call from Donald Fraser in 1914 for 'patriotic' literature at all levels, and Mary Gilmore's unanswered call in the same year for more children's play rhymes, to the actual appearance of a pamphlet of indigenous nursery rhymes by Thomas Gunn in 1917.

Such local efforts need to be seen in context and competition with publications of traditional nursery rhymes which were usually superior imported printings. One



competitive local example which catered to traditional interest in a charming, if ephemeral, way was a suite of six nursery postcards published c.1906 by the New South Wales Bookstall Company. The illustrator Muriel G. Nicholls (1879-?), who was said to produce child studies 'better than Kate Greenaway', later went on to contribute illustrations to *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1917).

However, so far as local efforts are concerned, their tentative interest and halting starts appear in retrospect to be part of an emerging concern for indigenous culture on all fronts. And it was once again through the pages of the *Bulletin* (at the end of 1917) that specific interest in Australian nursery rhymes achieved its first major and national success.

## Chapter 4

# Folklore Made to Order

### ‘The man from Menindee was counting sheep’

Previous examples of interest in Australian nursery rhymes, extending from 1908 to 1917, were totally eclipsed when the *Bulletin* again entered the field in late 1917. This time, however, the conception, scope and result were radically different from anything previously attempted. The *Bulletin* proposed a competition, a search for nursery literature that was aware of and catered to the idiosyncratic outlook of the Australian child.

And it is surely significant that this was not merely an invitation to previous literary contributors to the ‘Red Page’ but something that sought to tap family folklore and invention, something that reached out to the broader population of readers Australia-wide. The *Bulletin* obviously expected that its quest would attract widespread interest and that it had an engaging relevance for the times.

Thus in August 1917 the newspaper issued the following challenge:

Surely Australian nursery songs are as important (nearly) as Australian drama or fiction. This field has been almost entirely neglected, in spite of a large and expectant public ... At present we have to give our youngsters ‘Banbury Cross’ and ‘Dick Whittington’

and ‘I’ve been to London to see the Queen’—which are quite out of place in this land of kangaroos, rabbits and politicians.

A guinea will be given for the best nursery rime written by an Australian ... No parodies will be accepted ... Competitors need not deliberately drag in Australian references or Australian color—an Australian kid wouldn’t. A good Australian nursery rime may have no direct reference to Australian conditions, yet may be indubitably Australian in content. The Australian kid has an outlook different from that of an English kid: the sort of songs he wants to sing will not be those that the English kid sings.<sup>28</sup>

The wartime genesis of this imaginative call to arms should not be overlooked. In Sydney in particular, the 1914–18 war years witnessed the production of some of the most treasured Australian children’s classics: May Gibbs’ diminutive series of bushland booklets culminated in *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie* which, together with Norman Lindsay’s *The Magic Pudding*, was published in 1918. These works should most properly be seen and evaluated as part of the pictorial propaganda of a nation finding, for the first time, a national

bond of shared imagery and sentiment which proudly proclaimed 'Australia'. More ephemeral works like May Gibbs' postcards of the gumnut corps, Lionel Lindsay's full-page 'Chunder Loo' illustrations in the *Bulletin* and alphabet books like *Young Australia's ABC of the War* all contributed to boosting national morale. The *Bulletin's* nursery 'rime' competition was part of this broader activity and illustrates how all levels of culture, particularly folklore, are called into action as effective weapons in times of national threat.

The answer to the *Bulletin's* challenge was extraordinary—one thousand entries were received in six weeks and the entire 'Red Page' for 18 October 1917 was devoted to representative contributions and an accompanying editorial analysis.



The *Bulletin* 'rimes' were discussed under six categories: 'Abo. rimes, Station-life, City-life, Nonsense rimes, Natural History, and War-rimes'. The distinctions between these categories aren't always clear and other sub-categories such as 'Home Life' and 'the Moral Tale' were introduced in the main body of the text. Nevertheless, these six categories derived from thirty-two 'rimes' are presumably a representative guide to the one thousand contributions received.

The two examples categorised as belonging to the 'Abo.-class' are diametrically different and highlight opposing attitudes of the day. 'Take a stick' draws on native legend in an effort to connect young white Australians to a wealth of possible nursery lore other than their traditional English source material. On the other hand, 'Little Ji-ka Ji-ka' offers, by today's standards, an offensive and demeaning stereotype.

The category 'Station-life' provided four examples and some of the most outstanding 'rimes' of all. However, they present an expurgated vision of outback life without any sense of the threat and privation of that experience. The complementary category 'City-life' provided two succinct quatrains although possibly the most memorable is an example in the sub-category 'Home Life': 'Sonny boy, sonny boy' is actually a poignant little 'rime' in which the sentiment and the grim wartime reality behind the apparently sing-song lines remind us that there would have been many lonely families with husbands and fathers away at the war.

'Nonsense rimes' provided the second largest category of all, almost a quarter of the 'rimes' selected. More than half of these take their inspiration from native Australian fauna and if added to the 'Natural History' category become half of all the 'rimes' published on the 'Red Page'. Now while it is not surprising that native Australian fauna and their antics should provide pre-eminent inspiration to our nursery 'rime' poets there are other sources of inspiration whose failure to arouse interest should also be commented upon. This is assuming, of course, that the *Bulletin's* categories and the number of examples therein are proportionally representative of the one thousand entries received.

It is surprising that there is only one outright war 'rime': 'Over the sea is my Daddy to-day'. Once again, as with the expurgated vision of the outback, one wonders why the war, 'a paramount interest in most Australian kiddies' minds', was so meagrely represented. And almost entirely absent as a major source of inspiration is the motivation behind *The Magic Pudding* published only the very next year—food! Surely some of our most memorable traditional nursery verse is heavily

oriented towards an interest in food? Why were these Australian examples deficient?

And apart from D.H. Souter's 'The Man from Mungundi' (later changed to 'The Man from Menindie') there was little evidence that euphonious Australian place names were a source of amusement and inspiration. Only the year before in England the names of various London parishes had provided inspiration for what was probably the most significant volume of newly-minted nursery rhymes this century; Eleanor Farjeon's *Nursery Rhymes of London Town* (1916).

The large-scale public interest in the *Bulletin's* competition encouraged a reprint of the entire 'Red Page' for 18 October 1917 as an individual sheet.<sup>29</sup> Even more significantly, fourteen of these 'rimes' were then selected for publication in an illustrated Christmas booklet entitled *Australian Nursery Rimes* (1917). An edition of ten thousand copies was produced—an enormous print run for any Australian publication at the time let alone a children's item. Presumably the booklet was a great success and novelty for Christmas 1917. Perhaps its rarity today means that it was literally read to pieces: in the last decade only two copies have appeared in antiquarian bookseller's catalogues.

In *Australian Nursery Rimes*, D.H. Souter alone was accorded space for two verses; all twelve other contributors were represented by only a single verse each. Additionally, one of Souter's verses was chosen to open the publication. And it is not difficult to see why this pre-eminence was granted to Souter's work nor why he shared the prize for the best work: both of his nursery 'rimes' display the classic hallmarks of the genre.

'The Man from Menindie' and 'There Was a Little Rabbit' are succinct statements in verse; they present just

enough and no more. There is no extraneous detail, no elaboration or justification and their impact is thus direct and concise. Equally, their effect is also achieved by a forthright rhyme and metre that finishes the whole with an air of inevitability. There is a sing-song lilt to these 'rimes' although they never descend into mere doggerel. There is nothing precious and forced in their language or sentiment; they are not simply wordplay to accommodate a rhyme or to embody a quaint idea. There is narrative purpose and appeal in their cyclical structure and even though they are culture specific for Australia they do not fail to achieve a universality of appeal. The final hallmark of these two nursery 'rimes' is the complete lack of a self-conscious manner on Souter's part in writing for the young.

To a greater or lesser extent all other contributors to *Australian Nursery Rimes* suffer in comparison with Souter's work, exhibiting as they do some of the above limitations. One figure who could probably have matched Souter's engaging wordplay and wit only contributed illustrations to the booklet. Norman Lindsay was at the time writing *The Magic Pudding*, and the success of its rambunctious adventure is partly attributable to the Gilbert and Sullivan type songs and verses which he liberally added to the story line. As this nonsense verse from *The Magic Pudding* shows, Lindsay could also have been a talented author of nursery rhymes.

'Onions, bunions, corns and crabs,  
Whiskers, wheels and hansom cabs,  
Beef and bottles, beer and bones,  
Give him a feed and end his groans.'  
Norman Lindsay, *The Magic Pudding* (1918)

Souter's grasp of nursery rhyme essentials was exactly in line with the thinking of the *Bulletin's* editor in 1917, Arthur

Henry Adams (1872–1936), who actually held that esteemed position twice between 1906 and 1919. Adams was a widely experienced journalist and a respected author, poet, literary critic and playwright. He was also a keen supporter of Australian literary endeavours and particularly championed a role for locally written drama. Adams' final words on nursery rhymes were appended as a postscript to *Australian Nursery Rimes* in which he stressed two major things: that the 'rimes' originated to fulfil an expressed desire by Australian children and that they were part of family folklore:

The interesting fact came to light that many of these rimes were in actual use in the homes of the authors. Evidently the Australian child had felt the need for

Nursery Rimes that fitted its environment more familiarly than the traditional English Nursery Rimes; and his father or mother had to satisfy that natural instinct by putting Australian animals and birds, Australian conditions out-back and in the cities, into home-made Australian Rimes.<sup>40</sup>

Viewed in this way, the *Bulletin's* nursery 'rime' competition of 1917 becomes the first major attempt in Australia to record children's folklore. A recognition of this pioneering interest illuminates the almost invisible landscape of family folklore in Australia and helps to offset the myth that such interest was not evident until the second half of the twentieth century.



## The Red Page

### Australian Nursery Rimes

The kid that edits this page has had approximately a thousand Australian nursery rimes to choose from. He has even found a few genuine Australian rimes already sung by our kiddies. Ethel Pawley has heard Australian kiddies sing:—

Captain Cook  
Broke his hook  
Fishing for Australia.  
Captain Cook  
Wrote a book  
All about Australia.

That is the best our folk-lore has done: we can consciously do much better.

A number of competitors make the suggestion that from the selected nursery rimes a children's illustrated book should be made, for sale at Christmas for a war-fund. The results of this competition will be submitted to a publisher, though time is short for the publication of such a book, properly illustrated, by the Christmas season. The consent of all competitors to such a scheme is taken for granted, and each selected contribution will bear its author's signature.

Despite our prohibition many parodies were sent in, though in some cases these were mere Australian versions of well-known nursery rime-forms. Thus it seems hard to overlook a pleasant and genuinely Australian variant of 'Ten Little Nigger Boys,' in which 'Ten Little Rabbits' are similarly decimated, since their fates are genuinely Australian. The author's name has been lost, owing to his, or her, failing to sign every page of the MS.

### Ten Little Rabbits

Ten little Rabbits playing round a mine,  
One slipped down a shaft, then there were nine.  
Nine little Rabbits, hopping through a gate,  
One caught in a snare, then there were eight.  
Eight little Rabbits, gazing up to Heaven,  
An eagle hawk swooped down on one, then there were seven.

Seven little Rabbits, up to their tricks,  
When a red fox grabbed one, then there were six.  
Six little Rabbits, hunted in a drive,  
One got a dose of shot, then there were five.  
Five little Rabbits, drinking round a bore,  
One got squirted up, then there were four.  
Four little Rabbits, scratching round a tree,  
One ate a quince-jam bait, and then there were three.  
Three little Rabbits saw a jackeroo,  
One got asphyxiated, then there were two.  
Two little Rabbits, flirting in the sun,  
A gohanna swallowed one, then there was one.  
One little Rabbit, feeling lonely, when  
She had a family, and again there were ten.

Many competitors made the mistake of forwarding long narrative rimes. Where the youngster wants narrative it must be short. Act One: Enter Miss Muffet, sits, eats curds and whey. Act Two: Enter Spider, sits beside her. Act Three: Exit Miss Muffet. Curtain. When the mouse ran up the clock all it did was to run down again. The black hen merely laid eggs, with a feminine desire to please the male, for gentlemen.



## The Red Page

Sometimes she laid nine, and occasionally, with a praiseworthy effort, ten. Georgie Porgie bravely kissed the girls, but they inexplicably wept. However, when they began to play, he merely ran away. Though there is a second verse to the accident to Jack and Jill, few children want that anti-climax. Mary's lamb has three verses and a moral, though no child is interested in its subsequent adventures. There are exceptions, of course, but these are nursery rimes that kiddies have to have read to them.

The classical example of nursery rimes, 'Hey, Diddle, Diddle!' illustrates the perfect form. The child merely wants moving pictures—puss plays a fiddle, a cow makes a magnificent leap, a dog breaks into mistimed hilarity, and an elopement occurs among the table cutlery. These pictures have no connection with each other: there is no short-story—just haphazard pictures of things familiar to the child's mind. And nothing that is flashed on the child's mental screen appears ludicrous to it: these happenings are, in the child's mental world, interesting and possible.

Many competitors were too clever, too sophisticated. Some gave us pathos for grown-ups. Some even inflicted puns on the kid. Many told stories *of* kids, not *to* kids. A few wrote lullabies, not nursery rimes. Though nursery rimes are in the first instance taught to children, their delight is to learn them themselves. And many rimes were spoiled by a roughness of the metre: the kid's ear will pass by many faults if the tune goes trippingly.

The rimes submitted may be roughly divided into these classes: Abo, rimes, Station-life, City-life, Nonsense rimes, Natural History, and War-rimes.

In the Abo.-class Joice M. Nankivell gives us the abo.-version of the kookkooburra's laugh, which means in native language: 'Take a stick.'

Goug gour gahgah, goug gour gahgah,  
 Laughs the Kookkooburra,  
 Goug gour gahgah, goug gour gahgah,  
 Loud to one another;  
 Goug gour gahgah, take a stick,  
 Goug gour gahgah, take it quick,  
 Kookkooburra, Kookkooburra;  
 Goug gour gahgah, throw it high,  
 Till at last it strikes the sky,  
 Goug gour gahgah, goug gour gahgah,  
 There it sets the sun a-burning,  
 And assures the days returning,  
 Goug gour gahgah, goug gour gahgah,  
 Kookkooburra, Kookkooburra.

The native names in the following, Angela Kennedy assures us, are well known:—

Little Ji-ka Ji-ka! All the darkies like her  
 In her dainty Sunday dress and pinny.  
 Give her wattle-blossom and a joey 'possum—  
 She's a good Australian piccaninny.  
 And she lives outside Benalla with her father, Doutra Galla,  
 Who eats snakes for breakfast till he's pale.  
 He kills them with a waddy, and devours the head and  
 body—  
 And little Ji-ka Ji-ka eats the tail!



## The Red Page

The war has become a paramount interest in most Australian kiddies' minds. H.W. Stewart provides the best Kid's Complete History of the War:—

Over the sea is my Daddy to-day,  
Over the sea in Flanders.  
When I feel lonely for him I say:  
Daddy has gone with the guns  
Fighting the German Huns  
Over the sea in Flanders—  
Gone with the guns  
Fighting the Huns  
Over the sea in Flanders.

The Moral Tale is not strictly a nursery rime: it is merely a mean advantage taken by the grown-up to frighten the kid. However, as a curiosity, Jean Macpherson's is printed for its Australian setting:—

The fierce and frightful Bunyip  
Lives in a lonely scrub,  
And catches all the dirty boys  
Who do not like their tub.

He has a rapid aeroplane  
Steered by a flying-fox,  
To grab the naughty little girls  
Who never darn their sox.

And many a boy who played the wag  
The fearsome Bunyip caught,  
And girls who would not do their task  
Back to his den he brought.

There in a dark and horrid pool  
He soaks the dirty boys,  
And feeds small bunyips on the girls  
In spite of all their noise.

Home Life in town and country is responsible for some delightful rimes. R.H. Croll, taking advantage of the license allowed in nursery riming, gives us this delightful dressing song: *but* it is a song for Mother, not for the kid.

Sonny boy, sonny boy, just me and you.  
*Here's a little jacket, here's a little shoe.*  
Daddy's gone to fight for him, far away in France.  
*This year's petticoats, next year's pants.*

And here are two modern city-jingles:—

Butcher! Butcher! Butcher's cart,  
Coming down the street!  
Baby wants an apple-tart;  
Mummy wants some meat!  
W.A.R.

Tinkle! Tinkle! Telephone!  
Mummy's gone to town!  
All the trams are coming home!  
Tinkle! Tinkle! Telephone!  
Buzz

G.K. Soward's rime deserves space because it aptly expresses the Australian liking for the rain. Where the English kid tells his rain to go away and come again another day, the Australian youngster sings this:—



Rain! Rain!  
Come, down with you rain!  
Don't keep away any longer.  
The holes are all dry,  
And mummy will cry  
If you keep away any longer!

Rain! Rain!  
You'll get the cane  
If you stay away any longer!  
My daddy will sigh,  
And the little lambs die,  
If you stay away any longer!

Rain! Rain!  
Dear, ducky rain,  
Don't stay away any longer!  
I'll buy you a train  
And a sweet silver chain,  
If you won't stay away any longer!

Two Outback vignettes:—

Denis drives the waggon  
Click clack, click clack,  
Denis drives the waggon  
Far away and back.

Dobbin draws the waggon,  
Down the sandy track,  
Dobbin draws the waggon  
Far away and back.

Mary E. Fullerton

Muster, muster,  
All of a cluster;  
Bring in the sheep to be shorn.  
Bluster, fluster,  
Southerly buster;  
Poppity's pants are torn.  
Tup Mann

An Australian variant of an old nursery idea:—

My little bush humpy  
Baby's Head—Of wattle and dab,  
Baby's Hair—With bark on the roof  
Baby's Nose—And chimney of slab.  
Baby's Mouth—The door's in the middle.  
Baby's Eyes—The windows are two—  
Baby's Eyelids—So pull down the blinds,  
Or folks will look through.

H.E.P. Bracey

Edgar L. Stevens' hoof-beat measure is clumsier than this  
charming one by Walter E. Perroux:—

Old Bob's Canter

Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
That's what the hoofbeats do say.  
Daddy rode off to the township  
To buy me a Dolly to-day.  
Soon I will hear him returning,  
Bob's canter will tell me so true.  
Three ha'pence for tuppence.



## The Red Page

Three ha'pence for tuppence.  
Oh, Daddy, I *do* so love you!

The section devoted to Natural History and observation bulks largest in this competition. A selection:—

Wallaby, Wallaby, why do you jump,  
And never fall down on your head with a bump?  
And why is your tail so thick and so strong,  
And your front legs so short and hind legs so long?  
N.M.H.

There was a piccaninny and he alway wanted honey,  
But he didn't ask his daddy, for *he* hadn't any money—  
He only tied a feather to a little bumble-bee  
And chased it to its honeycomb inside a hollow tree.  
Racey Beaver

Said Billy Kooka to his mate,  
'Hohohahahoho!  
Let's find a good fat fish to eat,  
Hohohahahoho!'

Dame Kooka gave her head a shake,  
Hohohahahoho!  
'I see a fine fat tiger-snake,  
Hohohahahoho!'

The snake was hit by Kooka's beak,  
Hohohahahoho!  
And fish they did not further seek,  
Hohohahahoho!

The snake was dropped from up aloft,  
Hohohahahoho!

Until it was quite nice and soft,  
Hohohahahoho!  
And then the Kookas laughed with zest,  
'Hohohahahoho!  
For dinner tiger-snake is best,  
Hohohahahoho!'  
N.M.H.

Little Billy Bandicoot  
For potatoes loves to root,  
Eats them till his skin is tight  
All the big, black, creepy night.  
E.M.T.

Five grey rabbits who lived in a log  
Were chased one day by a kangaroo dog,  
But though they ran hard from that kangaroo pup,  
He caught and he killed and he gobbled them up.  
'Royal Orange'

Old Mother Kangaroo, stop! stop! stop!  
With your baby in your pouch will you hop, hop, hop?  
To see Mrs. 'Possum in the old gum-tree,  
In a nice dark hole with little possies three.  
Old Johnny Jackass sits up on top,  
And he laughs, and he laughs, as if he couldn't stop.  
He gives Mrs. 'Possum a pain in her head,  
For he always wants to laugh when she wants to go to bed.  
E.L. Russell

Six fat geese were grazing by the shore,  
They gobbled up grass till they could eat no more,  
One flew east and one flew west,  
And one flew onto a bulldog's nest.



One flew north and one flew south,  
 One flew into a dingo's mouth.  
 The one that flew east fell into the sea,  
 The one that flew west stuck in a mulga tree,  
 The one that flew south had a long way to go,  
 And then got smothered in the drifting snow.  
 The one that flew north was the fattest of the lot,  
 So I twisted her neck and put her in the pot.  
 J.H.

The weather is going to change!  
 Jackasses are down from the range.  
 When you hear that jovial scoff,  
 Wet seasons are not far off.  
 Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo! Koo, hoo, ha hoo! Koo, koo, hoo,  
 hoo, HOO!

Black crows on the white gum-tree!  
 Now a scorching day is to be—  
 When you hear that raucous cry,  
 Look out for a spell of 'dry.'  
 Caw-caw, caw-ik. Krore, krore, CAW!  
 Jeanong

The Bunyip lives in the dark lagoon;  
 Of course we can't see him when there's no moon,  
 And on moonlit nights he hides in his lair,  
 But all the same we know he is there.  
 An old blackfellow told Uncle Jim  
 That his father's father said to him  
 That *his* father's father told him so;  
 Uncle Jim told us and that's how we know.  
 Charles Maclean

An old Kookaburra, sitting on a gum,  
 Was the first to see the white man come.  
 He laughed, 'Ha-ha. What a queer, queer sight,  
 Blackboy, Blackboy, don't get a fright,  
 Hurry up here, and have a look.  
 It's Cook Cook Cook Cook, Cook Cook Cook.  
 Oo-oo-oo-oo. Ah-ah-ah-ah.  
 Cook, Cook, Cook.'  
 Bill

There was once a baby 'Roo, Baby 'Roo,  
 In a valley where the mallee  
 And the grasses always grew.  
 He would hop and skip and jump, Baby 'Roo,  
 Such a happy little chappie,  
 Such a pretty fellow, too.

And when he was tired of play, Baby 'Roo,  
 Niddy-noddy, sleepy-body,  
 Do you know what he would do?

Jump into his mother's pocket! Baby 'Roo,  
 Curl up warm there, safe from harm there,  
 Sleep and dream the whole night through.  
 Josephine

The man from Mungundi was counting sheep;  
 He counted so many he went to sleep.  
 He counted by threes and he counted by twos,  
 The rams and the lambs and the wethers and ewes;  
 He counted a thousand, a hundred and ten—  
 And when he woke up he'd to count them again.  
 D.H.S.



What are you doing  
 O little grey bear?  
 What are you chewing,  
 O little grey bear?  
 Sitting on mother's back  
 Having a ride,  
 Eating the gum-leaves  
 Among which you hide,  
 You are so happy  
 A-hiding up there,  
 Can Baby come up to you,  
 Little grey bear?

Ethel Pawley

Some interesting nonsense-rimes:—

There was a little Rabbit  
 That was hiding in his burrow,  
 When the Dingo came and told him  
 To expect him there to-morrow;  
 But the Rabbit thought he'd rather  
 That the Dingo didn't meet him;  
 So he found another burrow  
 And the Dingo didn't eat him.

D.H.S.

Jimpitty, Jumpitty, Kangaroo,  
 Tell me where you are jumping to?  
 Over the grass-trees all the day long,  
 Till my hands grow short and my tail grows long.

L.J.M.

Greedy Tom grew round and fat,  
 Peevish Jim grew tall and flat;  
 Wouldn't mend their ways at all;  
 Now Jim's a Bat, and Tom's a Ball.

Mary W.L. Roper

Billy had a gum-boil  
 Which made poor Billy grumboil.  
 The doctor said: 'That's *some* boil!  
 And does your tummy rumboil?  
 It seems to me abnormoil;  
 You'd better try some warm oil.'  
 So Billy got some hot oil,  
 And boiled it in a bottoil,  
 And on his gum did rub oil—  
 Which ended Billy's trouboil!

Z.Z.

Kangaroo, carry me, quick as can be;  
 Over the grassy plains, down to the sea—  
 Where I can paddle and splash all the day;  
 Watching the ships that are sailing away.

Montuna

The fluffy little native bear  
 Lived high up in a tree.  
 The naughty dingo called to him,  
 'Why don't you come to tea?'  
 'Because,' the little bear replied,  
 'It won't be good for me.'  
 And all the kookaburras laughed,  
 'Ha hahaha hee hee!'

R.G. Henderson



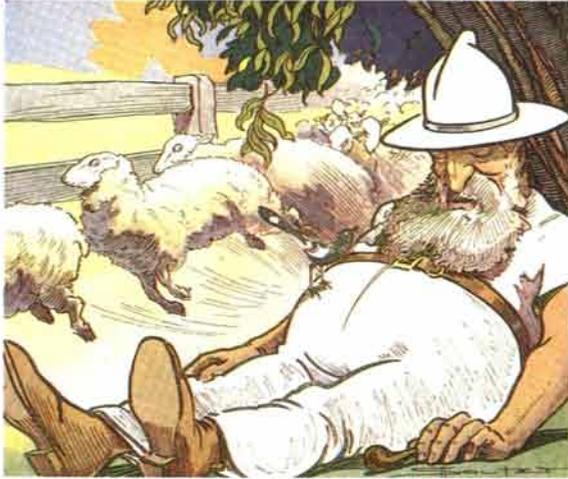
Six white cats in an ole tin tub ...  
 Muvver has gone to the Pub Pub Pub!  
 Over the paddicks an' through the scrub  
 Six white cats in a ole tin tub!  
 Boil the billy, it's time for grub,  
 Six white cats in a ole tin tub!  
*Wiv eyes on fire! Wiv eyes on fire!*  
 Gimme a sprat I'll swing youse higher!  
 Boil the billy, it's time for grub,  
 Muvver has gone to the Pub Pub Pub!  
 Hugh McCrae

Wallaby, wallaby, why  
 Do all the birdies fly?  
 Instead of a hop,  
 They go off, flop-flop,  
 Wallaby, wallaby, why?  
 P.L.M.

Every kid will have his or her preference: this kid confesses to several. 'Six White Cats' has the right jingle, but the pub-pub-pub jars. Father is more likely to be found there. Funny; but would kiddies think it funny? Somehow this kid suspects it will

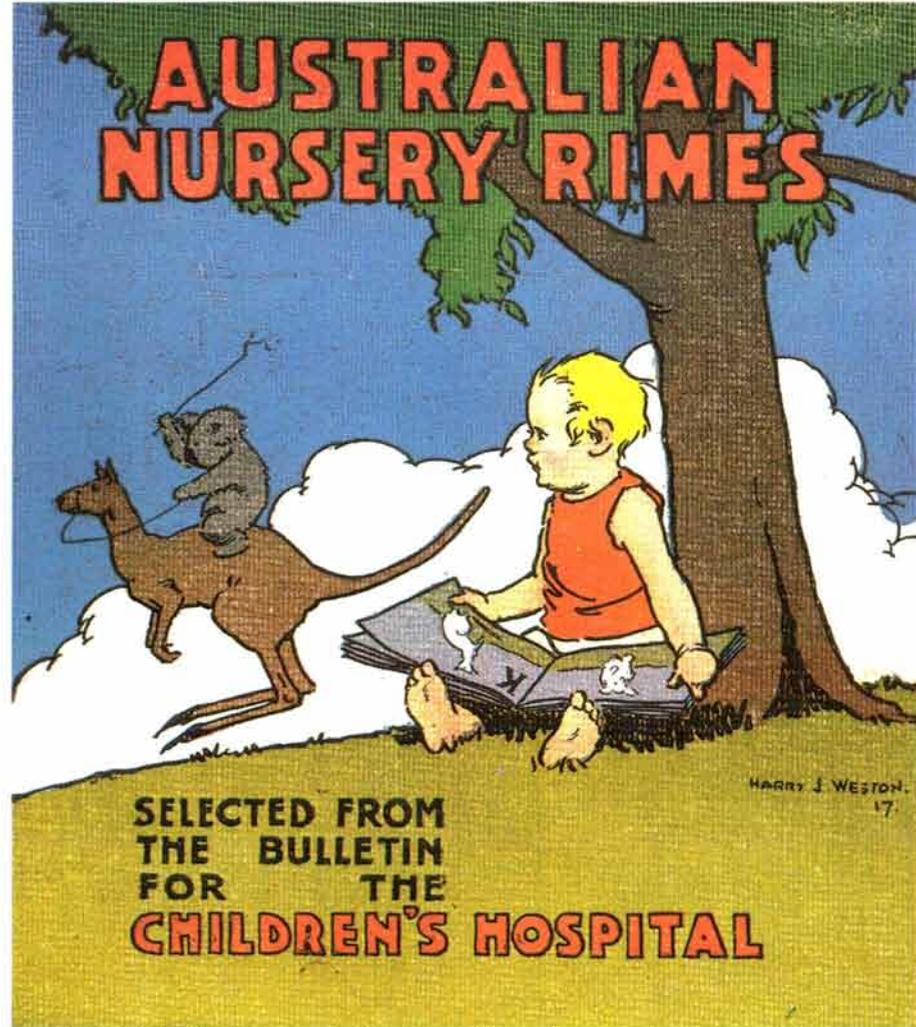
become popular. 'Josephine's' Baby 'Roo is neat and charming, but too matter-of-fact for the child's wandering mind. 'Bill's' Kookaburra who greeted Captain Cook is too clever. Some unnecessary lines, omitted by this page, put 'Six Fat Geese' out of the running. 'Rain, rain!' will be popular outback; but it seems to have one verse too many. Too long, too, is N.M.H.'s story of Billy Kooka and his mate. 'Old Mother Kangaroo' has the right atmosphere; 'Little Billy Bandicoot' has none: he is just a drab fact. 'Muster, muster!' has the right rime and metre, and the ludicrous surprise for its climax. 'Kangaroo, carry me,' is apt but rather slight; and 'Wallaby, Wallaby, why do you jump?' rightly asks the question without burdening the kid's mind with the answer. The 'Five Grey Rabbits' is fearfully exciting, and there is a thrilling climax. It is sure to be popular, owing to its galloping metre. But this kid's personal preference must be divided between 'Old Bob's Canter,' by Walter E. Perroux, Proserpine, Q., and 'The Man from Mungundi,' by D.H. Souter, Sydney, whose name sometimes is signed in other parts of this paper. The guinea is divided between them, and all other rimes printed will be paid for.<sup>31</sup>





The man from Menindie was counting sheep;  
 He counted so many he went to sleep.  
 He counted by threes and he counted by twos,  
 The rams and the lambs and the wethers and ewes;  
 He counted a thousand, a hundred and ten—  
 And when he woke up he'd to count them again.  
 —D. H. S.

The engaging cover design by Harry Weston to *Australian Nursery Rimes* (1917) clearly announces what is to be found within: indigenous rhymes for young Australians. The *Bulletin* competition which produced these 'rimes' was the first major attempt to provide made-to-order children's folklore in Australia. While a few of these 'rimes' have entered our oral tradition and are well remembered, the booklet is rarely sighted today and is here reproduced in its entirety.



SOMMY boy, sonny boy, just me and you,  
*there's a little jacket, here's a little shoe.*  
 Daddy's gone to fight  
 for him, far away  
 in France.  
*This year petticoat's,*  
*next year*  
**PAINTS.**

R. H. Croll



Three hapece for tuppence,  
 Three hapece for tuppence,  
 That's what the hootbeats do say,  
 Daddy rode off to the township  
 To buy me a Dolly to-day.  
 Soon I will hear him returning,  
 Bob's canter will tell me so true  
 Three hapece for tuppence,  
 Three hapece for tuppence,  
 Oh, Daddy, I gop so love you!

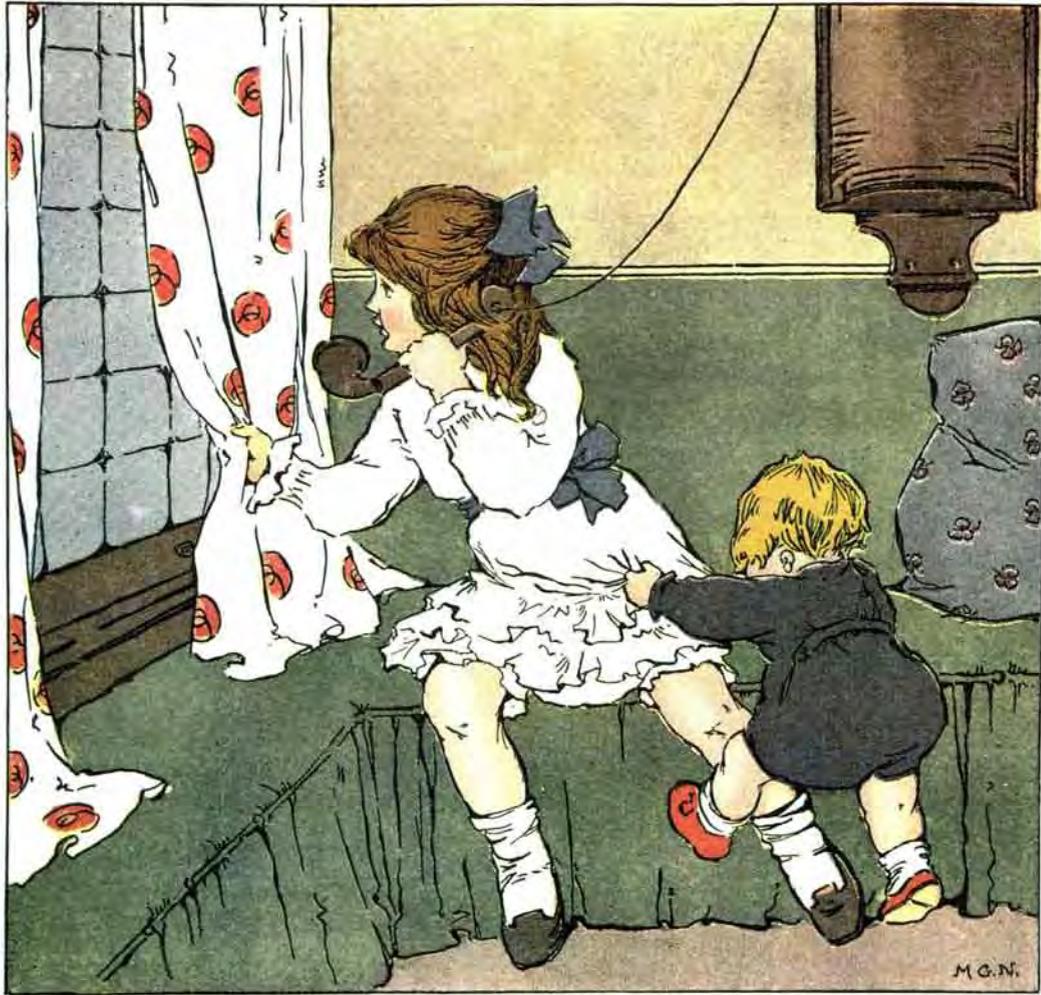
Walter C. Pankov

WALTER C. PANKOV 17



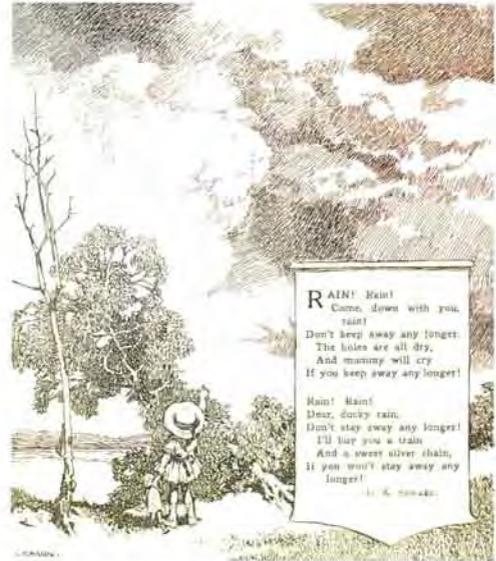
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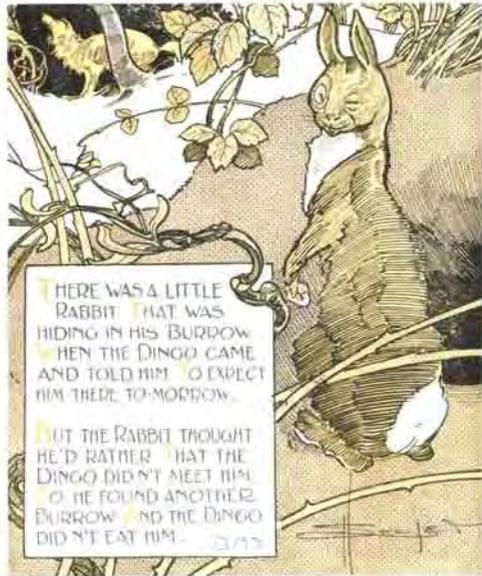
Muster, muster,  
 All of a cluster.  
 Bring in the sheep to be shorn  
 Bluster, fluster, southerly buster.  
 POPPITY'S pants are torn.



TINKLE TINKLE TELEPHONE  
 MUMMIE 'S GONE TO TOWN.  
 ALL THE TRAMS ARE COMING HOME  
 TINKLE TINKLE TELEPHONE.

BUZZ.





FIVE grey rabbits who lived in a log were chased one day by a kangaroo dog. But though they ran hard from that kangaroo pup, He caught and he killed and he gobbled them up.

"ROYAL OAKS."

THERE was once a baby 'Roo, Baby 'Roo, In a valley where the mallee And the grasses always grew. He would hop and skip and jump, Baby 'Roo, Such a happy little chappie, Baby 'Roo, Such a pretty fellow, too.



And when he was tired of play, Baby 'Roo, Niddy, noddy, sleepy-boddy, Do you know what he would do?

Jump into his mother's pocket! Baby 'Roo, Curl up warm there, safe from harm there, Sleep and dream the whole night through.

JUSTICE."



WHAT are you doing O little grey bear? What are you chewing, O little grey bear? Sitting on mother's back Having a ride, Eating the gum-leaves Among which you hide. You are so happy A hiding up there. Can baby come up to you, Little grey bear?

ETHEL FARLEY."



OLD Mother Kangaroo says! says! says! With your baby in your pouch, will you hop, frog, hop?

To see Mrs. Titmouse in the old gum-tree, In a nice dark hole with little posies there.

Old Billiey Jarrawee sits up on top, And he laughs and he laughs, so if he coughs, stop. He gives Mrs. Titmouse a peck in her head, For he always wants to laugh when she wants to nod.

R. F. HAYES."



Little Ji-ka Ji-ka! All the darkies like her In her dainty Sunday dress and pinny Give her wattle blossom and a joey possum— She's a good Australian piccaninny. And she lives outside Benalla with her father, Douffa Gallo. Who eats snakes for breakfast till he's pale He kills them with a waddy, and devours the head and body— And Little Ji-ka Ji-ka eats the tail!



Wallaby wallaby, why Do all the birdies fly? Instead of a hop, They go off flop-flop Wallaby, wallaby, why?

## Chapter 5

# 'Kid Rhymes'

### 'Out across the spinifex, out across the sand'

The *Bulletin* competition of late 1917 was the specific catalyst behind at least two other significant nursery rhyme projects in Sydney immediately after the war. However, there were other more general factors at the time which contributed to a broad interest in and demand for nursery literature, both traditional and indigenous.

In the post-war years, the publication of Australian children's books became firmly centred in Sydney with Angus & Robertson maintaining the lead they had established in 1918 with *The Magic Pudding* and *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie*. At the beginning of the second decade they issued such major titles as the first post-war edition of *Dot and the Kangaroo* (1920), May Gibbs' *Little Ragged Blossom* (1920) and *Little Obelia* (1921), C.J. Dennis' *A Book for Kids* (1921) and Amy Mack's *Bushland Stories* (1921). A stable of children's authors and illustrators was thus being established and their efforts presented as part of mainstream publishing activities.

Furthermore, Australian children's folklore was being made-to-order in the pages of May Gibbs. An oral tradition of cautionary tales had grown up in Australia, particularly for the rural child and these were the beginning of indigenous folklore for Australian youth:

The average bush youngster has a horror of darkness, and talks in awe-struck whispers of hairy men, ghosts, and bunyips. This fear is inculcated from babyhood. The mother can't always be watching in a playground that is boundless, and she knows the horrors that wait the bushed youngster. So she tells them there is a bunyip in the lagoon, and gigantic eels in the creek; and beyond that hill there, and in yonder scrub, there is a 'bogy-man'.<sup>52</sup>

Such folklore was finally given a pictorial dimension in the work of May Gibbs; her banksia man was the embodiment of these 'hairy men' lurking in the bush. Equally, her gumnut babies were an almost elemental derivation from the Australian bushland flora itself and from their very first appearance were seen to be 'a genuine and an original contribution to our Australian folklore'.<sup>53</sup> Her characters contributed to a national pictorial vocabulary; an indigenous family of nursery favourites for Australian children.

May's delight in wordplay frequently bubbles to the surface in her stories: the very names Snugglepot and Cuddlepie are themselves clear evidence of this delight. Their plosive, full-bodied sound rolls around the mouth and shows

that May possessed a keen ear attuned to language suitable for the nursery. Significantly, one of her earliest projects for children was entitled 'Nursery Rhymes from the Bush' (c.1905). Unfortunately, its Australiana content failed to interest a London publisher and when May was finally in demand, back in Australia, she did not revive this project.

May Gibbs did, however, make some contributions to our nursery rhyme lore. In 1924 *Chucklebud and Wunkydoo* included a most soothing lullaby sung by Mrs Possum to a sleepy gumnut baby:

There, there, Soo, Soo,  
 Never care, Soo, Soo,  
 Day's done, Soo, Soo,  
 Night's begun, Soo, Soo,  
 Stars are out, Soo, Soo,  
 Moon's about, Soo, Soo,  
 Cats are fighting, Soo, Soo,  
 Skeets are biting, Soo, Soo,  
 Grubs are growing, Soo, Soo,  
 Seeds are sowing, Soo, Soo,  
 I wonder why?  
 I wonder why?  
 I wonder why, Soo, Soo?

May Gibbs, *Chucklebud and Wunkydoo* (1924)

And hidden away in one of hundreds of May's comic strips is her own version of the traditional counting rhyme:

Ten Little Gumnuts, swinging on a vine,  
 One fell off, and then there were nine.  
 Nine little Gumnuts staying out too late  
 A Banksia man took one, then there were eight.  
 Eight little Gumnuts saw the Moon in Heaven  
 One sprang up to it, then there were seven.

Seven little Gumnuts, ill in bed with ticks  
 The Dr. couldn't cure One then there were six.  
 Six little Gumnuts learning how to dive  
 A big Fish swallowed One, then there were five.  
 Five Little Gumnuts, heard the Bunyip roar.  
 The Bunyip caught One, then there were four.  
 Four Little Gumnuts, sitting on a tree  
 A Whirlwind snatched One, then there were three.  
 Three Little Gumnuts sailing on the Blue  
 One fell overboard, then there were two.  
 Two Little Gumnuts playing 'wag' for fun.  
 A Big snake came along, then there was one.  
 One Little Gumnut sitting in the Sun  
 He melted right away, then there was none.  
 'Oh' sobbed Bib and Bub 'It's sad, as sad can be'  
 "'Tis but a song' cried Goanna 'Come along to tea.'  
 May Gibbs, *The Further Adventures of Bib and Bub* (1927)

This sudden proliferation of interest in Australian children's literature and its folkloric role established a general context for the ongoing encouragement of Australian nursery rhymes after the *Bulletin's* competition. A further factor which must have fostered an interest in nursery age literature in the early 1920s but which has not, to date, been cited as contributing to this was the immediate post-war concern for baby care.

On the eve of World War I there had been, increasingly, a critical eye cast upon the infant mortality rate in Australia and its damning comparison with New Zealand's much better record. Thereafter, the war itself diverted attention to adult care and away from issues of maternity and child care. However, when it was realised that the number of babies under twelve months of age who had died in Australia during the war years was almost equal to the number of soldiers lost, there was widespread concern.<sup>34</sup> The nation's greatest assets, its

infants and its young men, had been decimated and only the latter had received the publicity of casualty lists and honour rolls. It was time to redress this imbalance.

Politicians, medical figures, historians, journalists and self-appointed experts were united in vocalising the threat to Australia and re-energising jingoistic sentiments which might otherwise have been in danger of waning after 1918. And the answer to this racial suicide was unanimously seen to be the education of the Australian mother. The maternal figure in the home became the domestic exemplar of a prouder national image of Australia—the Motherland. The war front was relocated into the nurseries of Australia only now the enemy was disease, lack of baby care facilities and, above all, ignorance. The weapon was a campaign to educate mothers into a role as nation builders.<sup>35</sup>

The most eminent medical authority to lend support to this thinking and program was Dr Truby King. He had visited Sydney in December 1919 as a guest of the Royal Society and was instrumental in promoting the idea of a Baby Health Week, the first of which was held in Sydney in 1920. Thereafter Baby Health Clinics and Baby Health Weeks became a part of the Australian way of life.

This awakening interest in nursery care thus helps us to see publishing interest in nursery rhymes as more of a coherent part of Australian demands and interests and less as an isolated phenomenon. Unfortunately many of these factors were not sustained into the depressed years of the 1930s and there was a discernible lessening of interest in indigenous nursery rhymes in that decade.



The production of Australian nursery rhymes such as those featured in the *Bulletin* prompts one to ask if any of this made-to-order folklore was ever really assimilated into an oral tradition. One Melbourne researcher of children's folklore in Australia has suggested that the only 'rime' which has remained in circulation is 'Little Ji-ka Ji-ka'<sup>36</sup> and has concluded that folklore cannot be written to order. While this conclusion is broadly true its dismissive stance devalues the printed word and overlooks the limited geographical range of much oral folklore. In the days when recitation, in the home as well as at school, was a socially endorsed attribute, many Sydney children at least may well have used *Australian Nursery Rimes* in their repertoire.

One Sydney correspondent to the Museum of Australian Childhood vividly remembers the *Bulletin's* nursery 'rimes' being read to her in the late 1920s and although the booklet itself was later lost, these 'rimes' remained current as part of her family's cherished folklore:

Some of the 'rimes' have endured and are still recited and enjoyed by small children—who have heard them from a fourth generation. There is a bit of variation which has crept in over the years of re-telling.<sup>37</sup>

Further evidence is provided by the National Library of Australia's O'Connor Collection of Australian Folklore.<sup>38</sup> Here someone who was raised in Tasmania in the 1920s still remembers four of the 'rimes'. No doubt there are others who experienced these 'rimes' via the actual *Bulletin* booklet or later via their rare appearance in anthologies or from an oral source.

The *Bulletin's* booklet was only sold as a novelty in Sydney during the 1917 Christmas season; its single printing

and ephemeral nature mitigated against any long-term assimilation of its nursery 'rimes' into Australian family lore on a large scale. Four of the 'rimes' resurfaced in 1932 in the first significant anthology of Australian poetry for young readers—*Frolic Fair: A Book of Australian Verse for Children Under Ten*. None of them seem to have reappeared thereafter until 1967 when Joyce Saxby included five in her anthology, *One Hundred Poems Chosen for Children*. The booklet itself faded from view and today is virtually forgotten. A fine copy did, however, appear in a Sotheby's book auction in Melbourne in 1990 and fetched a most impressive sale price of \$1100! No doubt much of the auction interest in this item was generated by Norman Lindsay collectors—the booklet contains two illustrations by Lindsay.

In its day the *Bulletin's* competition did have a discernible if short-lived influence on Australian versifiers and for a few brief years there was a flurry of interest, particularly on the Sydney scene, in composing nursery rhymes. The competition was very likely the impetus behind a local series of nursery rhyme shape books and it undeniably prompted Angus & Robertson to plan a major collection of nursery rhyme adaptations. The failure of this collection to appear was offset by the inspiration it generated in C.J. Dennis whose *A Book for Kids* (1921) was the ultimate outcome of his involvement in this otherwise unproductive project.

In 1918 a Sydney publisher issued a series of five shape books for children: *Little Bo-Peep*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Little Miss Muffet* and *Little Betty Blue*. Although their titles were taken from traditional nursery rhymes their entire production was proudly Australian.

These are amongst the most delightful of all Australian nursery publications and their rarity and the fact that very few

such novelties were produced is explained in a plaintive letter from the publishing house:

We would like to point out that these booklets represent the first attempt by an Australian Publishing House to produce children's cut-out Booklets ... The Artist is an Australian, the verse is by an Australian, the blocks were made by an Australian firm of etchers ... Owing to the high cost of labor in Australia, the price of these booklets made it impossible to market them ...

Until a tariff wall is erected around Australia prohibiting the market to American and Japanese goods of a similar character, it would be folly for any firm to attempt to market booklets of a like nature.<sup>39</sup>

This enterprising publisher was actually Harry Weston who had provided some illustrations, including its cover, for the *Bulletin's* booklet. No doubt the unsigned illustrations in the Baby Booklets are from his pen; the verses, unfortunately, remain anonymous. The restrictions which were a justifiable complaint in 1918 continued to blight the local production of children's book novelties and it was to be over a decade before another series of Australian shape books were issued.<sup>40</sup>

The most effective verse in the Baby Booklet series was contained in *Little Miss Muffet* and centred on the antics of Australian fauna:

Ring-a, Ring-a Kangaroo!  
Learn to hop like your mothers do!  
Over a twig held high from the ground,  
Up we go! Down we go! Round and round.  
*Anon, Little Miss Muffet (1918)*

Three lizards went down to a water-pool  
 At the foot of the old bush track  
 But a cunning fish took a tail off—swish.  
 And two-and-a-half went back.

Anon, *Little Miss Muffet* (1918)

A slight contribution to this evolving interest in culture-specific nursery rhymes for Australian children was Albert Bock's pamphlet: *The Alliance Choice Budget of Nursery Rhymes, Original, Wise & Otherwise*, published by the author in Tasmania c.1920. There is very little evidence of any original contribution to this collection of traditional nursery rhymes apart from a variation of 'Doctor Foster Went to Gloucester' with its relocation to the northern Tasmanian town of Deloraine:

Doctor Kane went in the rain,  
 To visit a patient at Deloraine;  
 And on his way back he missed the track,  
 He stept in a puddle, a very deep mudhole  
 And never came back again.

Albert Bock, *The Alliance Choice Budget of Nursery Rhymes*  
 (c.1920)

One wonders if this was an original piece by Bock or something that evolved in the nurseries of Tasmania.



The major outcome of the *Bulletin's* competition was an ambitious publishing proposal which involved six Australian poets: Ruth Bedford, Leslie H. Allen, Amy Mack, Harry Burrell, C.J. Dennis and Zora Cross. Of these, Leslie Allen had the most recognised ability for writing verse suitable for children: his *Billy-Bubbles* appeared in 1920 and was a

popular, if brief, success. Ruth Bedford had already had some precocious verse, not children's verse, privately printed while still a schoolgirl. Amy Mack was well known for a series of short nature stories for children and Harry Burrell was a family friend of Mack and her husband, and a total newcomer to writing. C.J. Dennis had no profile as a children's author while Zora Cross' only verse for children, *The City of Riddle-Me-Ree*, had appeared in 1918. All of these figures formed an association with Angus & Robertson and all contributed a varying number of nursery rhymes to the projected anthology with the majority being by Zora Cross and Ruth Bedford.

In 1920 Ruth Bedford sent nursery rhymes which she had co-authored and which had previously appeared in the *Bulletin*<sup>41</sup> to George Robertson of Angus & Robertson in the hope that he would consider publishing a modest booklet.<sup>42</sup> From Robertson's reply it was obvious that he had already been considering a volume of Australian nursery rhymes, of adaptations rather than totally original verse:

When the *Bulletin* Nursery Rhyme Competition was on we determined to try a volume of the old rhymes adapted, when circumstances permitted it.<sup>43</sup>

Robertson's attitude was therefore diametrically opposed to the stance the *Bulletin* had taken in regard to indigenous verse. It was this chauvinistic question concerning the suitability of adapted nursery rhymes over original Australian rhymes which differentiated the efforts of these versifiers.

Zora Cross was engaged to edit this volume of 'old rhymes adapted' and worked sporadically on it over the next four years. In expectation of an eventual release it was even advertised in 1924 as *Australian Nursery Rhymes*.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, after an initial burst of interest and activity, a number of factors combined to slow the project down. C.J. Dennis, surely the most prestigious contributor, disliked Ruth Bedford's verse and specifically criticised it for being 'acclimatized'.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, Zora Cross failed to bring the project to completion; thereby causing a rift in her relationship with George Robertson, and also depriving Australian children's literature of what promised to be a distinguished collection.

The story of this ill-fated project has never been told and certainly warrants detailed attention. (The correspondence and rhymes submitted to the Angus & Robertson anthology are held in the Mitchell Library, Sydney. The rhymes reproduced over the following pages are from this source.)

Almost all of the dozens of nursery rhymes written for Angus & Robertson were 'acclimatized'—they were traditional rhymes adapted to an Australian setting. The most memorable of these rhymes were those written by Ruth Bedford and Zora Cross.

Ruth Bedford (1882–1963) was a poet, playwright, journalist and children's author whose literary talent was manifested at a precocious age: her first booklet of verse was published in 1893. Between 1913 and 1934 she produced three volumes of verse for young Australians. Surprisingly, none of her efforts in the nursery rhyme genre were included in these works. Her friendship with Dorothea Mackellar (they collaborated on two novels) may have prompted a similar interest in nursery rhymes in her compatriot: Mackellar's volume of verse, *Dreamharbour* (1923), includes a section of 'Old rhymes and undertones' which pays homage to various nursery rhyme characters and extends their narrative into adult territory.

### Oleander, Jacaranda

Oleander,  
Jacaranda,  
Make it cool on my veranda;  
In the scent and shade I'll stop  
While the petals drop, drop, drop.  
Ruth Bedford, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Georgey Porgey

Georgey Porgey, Kurrajong-tree,  
Took the girls to a billy-tea;  
When they asked for a second cup  
Georgey Porgey had drunk it up!  
Ruth Bedford, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Ten Little Wallabies

Ten little wallabies standing in a line—  
A big man shot one, and then there were nine.  
  
Nine little wallabies scrambling through a gate—  
One got stuck there, and then there were eight.  
  
Eight little wallabies hopping all uneven—  
One fell over, and then there were seven.  
  
Seven little wallabies met with seven ticks—  
One got in too far, and then there were six  
  
Six little wallabies bounding in a drive—  
One got captured, and then there were five.  
  
Five little wallabies playing round a bore—  
One got drowned there, and then there were four.  
  
Four little wallabies underneath a tree—  
A bough fell and squashed one, and then there were three.

Three little wallabies boxed a kangaroo—  
One got beaten, and then there were two.

Two little wallabies out on the run—  
One picked a bait up, and then there was one,

One little wallaby hopping all alone—  
He was made a pet of, and then there was none.  
Ruth Bedford, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

Zora Cross (1890–1964) was a very different figure to Ruth Bedford and at first glance it is perhaps difficult to see why George Robertson should have entrusted her with the compilation of a book of nursery rhymes. After all, in its day Zora Cross' poetry was regarded as rather forthright in its frank and sensuous themes of love and sexuality; it was uncompromisingly adult. The woman herself aroused strong partisan feelings in many and George Robertson was so affected as to compare her to Charlotte Brontë!

When Angus & Robertson's nursery rhyme anthology was proposed, they had already published two volumes of Cross' adult verse and were about to issue another. They had issued a very slight booklet, a brief verse fantasy of hers for children, *The City of Riddle-Me-Ree*, in 1918 and this was her sole contribution to children's literature. Even so, this complex and self-dramatising personality was able to curtail her often prolix and undisciplined writing and produce succinct nursery verses.

### Bye Baby Roving

Bye Baby Roving  
Daddy's gone a droving  
Soon we'll hear his stockwhip crack  
Then we'll know he's coming back.  
Zora Cross, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

Mary, Mary, quite contrary  
How does your section grow?  
Sticks and stones and wallaby bones  
And wattles wherever you go.  
Zora Cross, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Willy, Willy Wagtail

Willy, Willy Wagtail  
Sitting on a cow's tail  
If the cow should wag her tail  
Willy, Willy flies away.  
Zora Cross, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

The other nursery rhymes contributed to Angus & Robertson's project, with the exception of Leslie Allen's verse, were nowhere near as effective as those of Ruth Bedford and Zora Cross:

### The Snail

Snail, Snail, shoot out your horns,  
You walk so slow you must have corns.  
'And you'd walk slow and your joints would crack  
If you had to carry your house on your back.'  
Leslie H. Allen, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Four and Twenty Locusts

Four and twenty locusts sitting on a tree,  
Buzz-buzz-buzz-buzz said one and twenty-three.  
Four and twenty locusts flying towards the sun,  
Buzz-buzz-buzz-buzz said twenty-three and one.  
Leslie H. Allen, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Three Wise Men of Melbourne

Three wise men of Melbourne  
 Went to sea in a bowl,  
 If they'd gone in a billy  
 'Twould have been just as silly.

Amy Mack, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

### Little Jacky Kookaburra

Little Jacky Kookaburra  
 Sitting in disgrace—  
 Came to school one morning  
 With a scowl upon his face.

He would not say his A B C,  
 But giggled all the day,  
 So teacher gave him 1 2 3,  
 And kept him in from play.

He called Miss Maggie 'Sticky-beak,'  
 Fie! but only once;  
 Then teacher made a cap for him,  
 And wrote upon it—DUNCE.

Harry Burrell, 'Angus & Robertson anthology' (1920)

The only positive outcome of this ill-fated project was that C.J. Dennis' contributions grew from a few short nursery rhymes into an entire publication: his 1921 work *A Book for Kids*.

C.J. Dennis was a household name in Australia during the First World War as the country took his characters from *The Sentimental Bloke* to its heart. However, this success was not sustained and both Dennis and his publisher were disappointed with the sales of some of his later works. It was in this mood of some self doubt that George Robertson

attempted to involve Dennis in his projected anthology of Australian nursery rhymes:

I did not intend asking you to contribute to A. & R.'s Nursery Rhyme Book ... but in your present state of mind and body I feel sure the job will do you good.<sup>46</sup>

Robertson's typical concern for the wellbeing of one of the firm's authors prompted this gesture and yet he could scarcely have foreseen that it would soon engage all of Dennis' interest and zeal. One week after Robertson first suggested the idea and sent copies of Ruth Bedford's nursery rhymes, Dennis was already committed:

Certainly I shall do some nursery rhymes for you. In fact, I have finished a few already, but I shall do some more before sending the lot. I do not care for the sample rhymes you have sent. These are merely parodies of well known English rhymes and say very little for the originality of Australians.<sup>47</sup>

Dennis, in fact, probably did not need much encouragement to embark on a project for children. As early as 1915 he had written to another publisher outlining some of his plans and interests: 'I have already, almost ready, and in preparation ... A Book of Australian Fables & Fairy Tales ... A Book of Illustrated Nonsense Verse.'<sup>48</sup>

It was no wonder then that Dennis responded to George Robertson's proposal with immediate creative zeal. Within three months he sent Robertson the first of the promised rhymes. Significantly, however, he was no longer prepared to contribute to a collection but clearly preferred a separate and individual work—a work that was to become *A Book for Kids*:

By this mail I am sending you a few Australian nursery rhymes ... I promised them, for your collection, but if A. & R. will favourably consider a book of kid rhymes by C.J. Dennis, I should like them kept for that.<sup>49</sup>

Robertson's enthusiasm for this new proposal was immediate and sustained and Dennis devoted much of 1921 to his so-called 'kid rhymes'. He did, however, stress that they were not all nursery rhymes and that their intended audience was wider than originally conceived: 'Something for kids of all ages.'<sup>50</sup>

Although this was Dennis' first, and only, book for children it was not the first time that he had used a nursery rhyme format. He had appropriated the incisive brevity and lilt of such rhymes to good effect in his satirical verse for adults on more than one occasion in the past. As early as 1907 he had composed political jibes based on 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' and 'Cock Robin',<sup>51</sup> Dennis' renewed interest in nursery rhymes following Robertson's commission over a decade later also produced further parodies for an adult audience:<sup>52</sup>

Ding, dong, bell!  
Truth is in a well.  
Can politicians fish her out?  
'Tis very hard to tell.

C.J. Dennis, 'Nursery rhymes (for political babes)', *Herald*  
(4 December 1922)

Hi, diddle, diddle! The Federal riddle!  
Elections will be here soon;  
And I neither know nor care how they go  
Any more than the man in the moon.

C.J. Dennis, 'Nursery rhymes (for political babes)', *Herald*  
(4 December 1922)

Dennis' parody of traditional nursery rhymes for satirical purposes should not be thought of as contradicting his professed aversion to 'acclimatized' rhymes. He obviously felt that the parodic use of nursery rhymes for an adult audience was justified while at the same time Australian children deserved their own nursery rhymes.

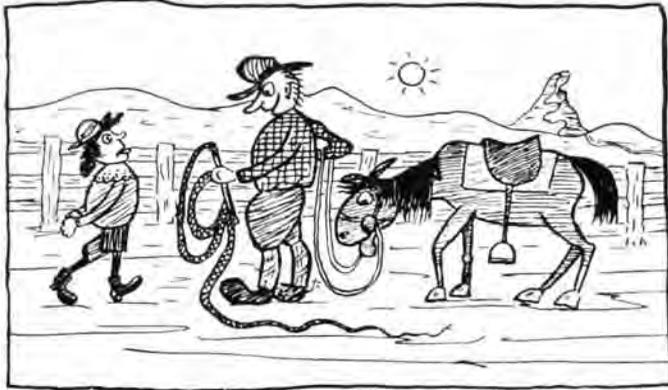
The characteristics of children's play—humour, vulgarity, wordplay and the interweaving of reality and fantasy—are also the characteristics of the successful nursery rhyme and serve to remind us that such rhymes are frequently accompanied by actions, mime and other playtime activities. Dennis' verses are ideally suited to this play mode; they are robust and boisterous entertainment. Indeed, the opening line of each verse in 'Cuppacumalonga' reads like a playground taunt:

### Cuppacumalonga

'Rover, rover, cattle-drover, where go you to-day?'  
I go to Cuppacumalonga, fifty miles away;  
Over plains where Summer rains have sung a song of glee,  
Over hills where laughing rills go seeking for the sea,  
I go to Cuppacumalonga, to my brother Bill.  
Then come along, ah, come along!  
Ah, come to Cuppacumalonga!  
Come to Cuppacumalonga Hill!

'Rover, rover, cattle-drover, how do you get there?'  
For twenty miles I amble on upon my pony mare,  
Then walk awhile and talk awhile to country men I know,  
Then up to ride a mile beside a team that travels slow,  
And last to Cuppacumalonga, riding with a will.  
Then come along, ah, come along!  
Ah, come to Cuppacumalonga!  
Come to Cuppacumalonga Hill!

'Rover, rover, cattle-drover, what do you do then?  
 I camp beneath a kurralong with three good cattle-men;  
 Then off away at break of day, with strong hands on the  
 reins,  
 To laugh and sing while mustering the cattle on the  
 plains—  
 For up at Cuppacumalonga life is jolly still.  
 Then come along, ah, come along!  
 Ah, come to Cuppacumalonga!  
 Come to Cuppacumalonga Hill!



'Rover, rover, cattle-drover, how may I go too?  
 I'll saddle up my creamy colt and he shall carry you—  
 My creamy colt who will not bolt, who does not shy nor  
 kick—  
 We'll pack the load and take the road and travel very quick.  
 And if the day brings work or play we'll meet it with a will.  
 So Hi for Cuppacumalonga!  
 Come along, ah, come along!  
 Ah, come to Cuppacumalonga Hill!  
 C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

Equally effective is Dennis' ability to weave a carefully balanced strand of reality and fantasy into a beguiling pattern. Niceties of discrimination play no part in the nursery rhyme; reality and fantasy are intermingled and their territory has no clear demarcation. Dennis obviously appreciated this as well as the value of wordplay. Invariably he chooses words for their onomatopoeic effect, bizarre sound and rhyming potential.

In his mastery of the incantatory line Dennis could be considered Australia's answer to Edward Lear. This is most apparent when he takes an unusual Australian place name and centres it in nonsense verse that appropriates something akin to the drive and confident momentum of Lear's limericks. And although Dennis' rhymes are assertively culture specific, such real-life Australian towns as Burrumbeet, Ballarat, Gundagai, Oodnadatta and Booboorowie (*sic*) have a euphony that gives them universal appeal. Dennis even went so far as to insert such comic inventions as Beetaloo and Cuppacumalonga into his list of actual towns! His use of Australian place names is such that a total inversion of reality occurs. These place names become of most significance for their comical sound and bizarre word colour: they become, in fact, nonsense words as in this 'ridiculous riddle' and its companions:

### Woolloomooloo

Here's a ridiculous riddle for you:  
 How many o's are in Woolloomooloo?  
 Two for the W, two for the m,  
 Four for the l's, and that's plenty for them.  
 C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

## The Traveller

As I rode in to Burrumbeet,  
I met a man with funny feet;  
And, when I paused to ask him why  
His feet were strange, he rolled his eye  
And said the rain would spoil the wheat;  
So I rode on to Burrumbeet.

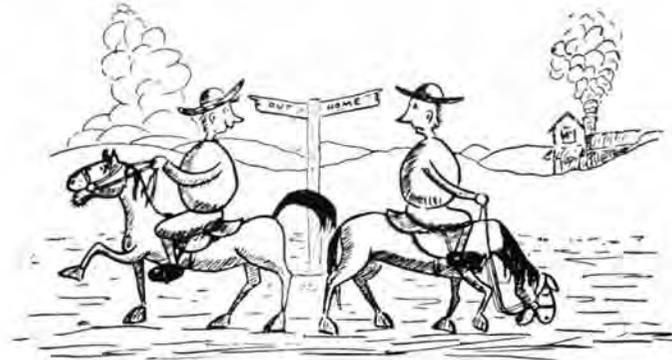
As I rode in to Beetaloo,  
I met a man whose nose was blue;  
And, when I asked him how he got  
A nose like that, he answered, 'What  
Do bullocks mean when they say 'Moo?'  
So I rode on to Beetaloo.

As I rode in to Ballarat,  
I met a man who wore no hat;  
And, when I said he might take cold,  
He cried, 'The hills are quite as old  
As yonder plains, but not so flat.'  
So I rode on to Ballarat.

As I rode in to Gundagai,  
I met a man and passed him by



Without a nod, without a word.  
He turned, and said he'd never heard  
Or seen a man so wise as I.  
But I rode on to Gundagai.



As I rode homeward, full of doubt,  
I met a stranger riding out:  
A foolish man he seemed to me;  
But, 'Nay, I am yourself,' said he,  
'Just as you were when you rode out.'  
So I rode homeward, free of doubt.

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

## A Change of Air

Now, a man in Oodnadatta  
He grew fat, and he grew fatter,  
Though he hardly had a thing to eat for dinner;  
While a man in Booboorowie  
Often sat and wondered how he  
Could prevent himself from growing any thinner.

So the man from Oodnadatta  
He came down to Booboorowie,

Where he rapidly grew fatter;  
 And the folk will tell you how he  
 Urged the man in Booboorowie  
 To go up to Oodnadatta—  
 Where he lived awhile, and now he  
 Is considerably fatter.

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

### Riding Song

Flippity-flop! Flippity-flop!  
 Here comes the butcher to bring us a chop,  
 Cantering, cantering down the wide street  
 On his little bay mare with the funny white feet;  
 Cantering, cantering out to the farm,  
 Stripes on his apron and basket on arm.  
 Run to the window and tell him to stop—  
 Flippity-flop! Flippity-flop!

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

### Growing Up

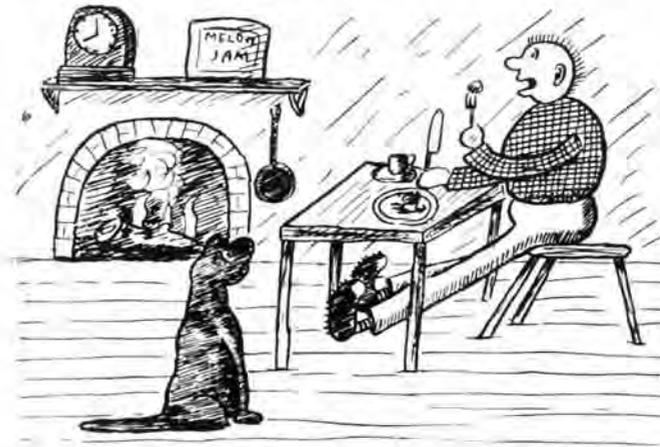
Little Tommy Tadpole began to weep and wail,  
 For little Tommy Tadpole had lost his little tail,  
 And his mother didn't know him, as he wept upon a log;  
 For he wasn't Tommy Tadpole, but Mr. Thomas Frog.

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

### The Funny Hatter

Harry was a funny man, Harry was a hatter;  
 He ate his lunch at breakfast time and said it didn't matter.  
 He made a pot of melon jam and put it on a shelf,  
 For he was fond of sugar things and living by himself.  
 He built a fire of bracken and a blue-gum log,  
 And he sat all night beside it with his big-black-dog.

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)



### The Unsociable Wallaby

Willie spied a wallaby hopping through the fern—  
 Here a jump, here a thump, there a sudden turn.  
 Willie called the wallaby, begging him to stop,  
 But he went among the wattles with a  
 flip,  
 Flap,  
 FLOP!

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

### The Drovers

Out across the spinifex, out across the sand,  
 Out across the saltbush to Never land,  
 That's the way the drovers go, jogging down the track—  
 That's the way the drovers go. But how do they come back?  
 Back across the saltbush from Never Never land,  
 Back across the spinifex, back across the sand.

C.J. Dennis, *A Book for Kids* (1921)

### The Feast

Cackle and lay, cackle and lay!  
 How many eggs did you get to-day?  
 Two in the manger and four in the shed,  
 Six in the box where the chickens are fed,  
 Two in the tussocks and ten in the tub,  
 And nearly two dozen right out in the scrub.  
 Hip, hooray! Pudding to-day!  
 I think the hens are beginning to lay.  
*C.J. Dennis, A Book for Kids (1921)*

### The Famine

Cackle and lay, cackle and lay!  
 How many eggs did you get to-day,  
 None in the manger, and none in the shed,  
 None in the box where the chickens are fed,  
 None in the tussocks and none in the tub,  
 And only a little one out in the scrub.  
 Oh, I say! Dumplings to-day.  
 I fear that the hens must be laying away.  
*C.J. Dennis, A Book for Kids (1921)*



An interesting development during the 1920s was the increasingly effective use of nursery rhymes in advertising campaigns. In *Three Centuries of Nursery Rhymes and Poetry for Children* (2nd edn, 1977), the Opies devote one complete section to ‘Nursery rhymes in advertising’ and list nursery publications and novelties from 1860 to 1971 which were issued to enhance the image, or at least the sales, of various products.

In Australia such attempts included the elaborate promotional Christmas ventures staged by Farmer’s Store (Sydney) to advance itself as ‘the Children’s Store’: in December 1919, for example, the store staged a series of nursery rhyme tableaux complete with a souvenir booklet of traditional nursery rhymes. More typical was the publication of a collection of nursery rhymes adapted to incorporate validating references to specific nursery-oriented products like baby food, soap, toys and children’s clothes. As early as 1905 the Willsmere Certified Milk Company (Melbourne) had issued a series of twelve postcards with nursery rhyme adaptations to promote their product. In 1919 two Australian companies published acclimatised nursery rhymes in their promotional campaign for Glaxo powdered milk and Sun-Raysed dried fruit:

Pussy cat, Pussy cat, where have you been?  
 I’ve been out looking for milk sweet and clean.  
 Pussy cat, Pussy cat, how did you dare?  
 Didn’t I say there’s no GLAXO to spare?  
 I’m just as sorry as sorry can be:  
 It’s all meant for Baby and Mother and me.  
*Anon, Glaxo Nursery-Rhymes (1919)*

Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard,  
 The Milk had gone sour in the night.  
 She did get a scare! But some GLAXO was there  
 So her baby had breakfast all right.  
*Anon, Glaxo Nursery-Rhymes (1919)*

Little Jack Horner  
 Sat in a corner,  
 So contented and pleased and amazed.  
 This up-to-date chappie,



LITTLE BOY BLUE  
COME BLOW UP THE HORN  
CERTIFIED MILK ALWAYS  
COMES WITH THE HORN.

THE WILLSMERE CERTIFIED MILK CO. TEL. 2911

Had what made him happy,  
Those beautiful dried fruits SUN-RAYSED.

S.A. Thompson  
from C.J. DeGaris, ed., *'Sun-Raysed' Children's Fairy Story*  
Book (1919)

Sing a song of sixpence,  
Cost of living's high,  
Four and twenty persons  
Dined on one big pie;



MARY MARY  
QUITE CONTRARY  
HOW DOES YOUR  
BABY GROW?

WELL AND STRONG AND  
BROAD AS IT'S HOME  
THANKS TO THE  
CERTIFIED GO.

THE WILLSMERE CERTIFIED MILK CO. TEL. 2911

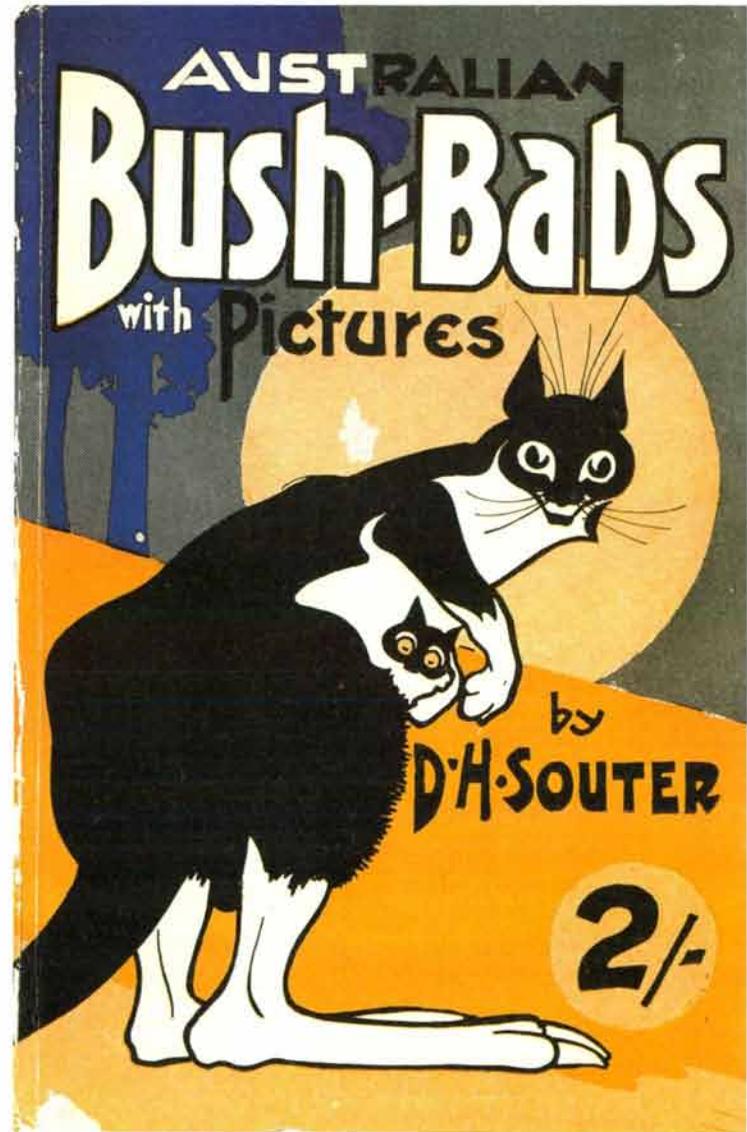
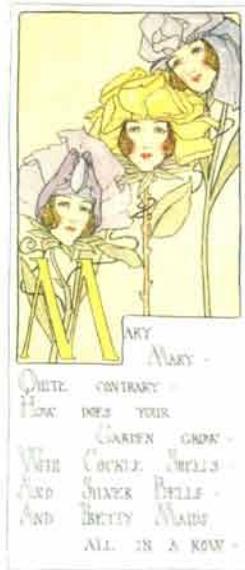
Yet they rose up nourished  
And walked out with a swing;  
The pie was filled with SUN-RAYSED,  
Fit banquet for a king.

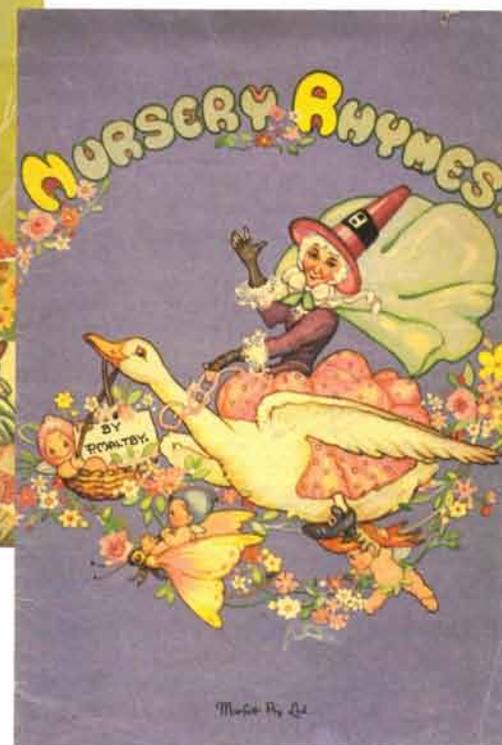
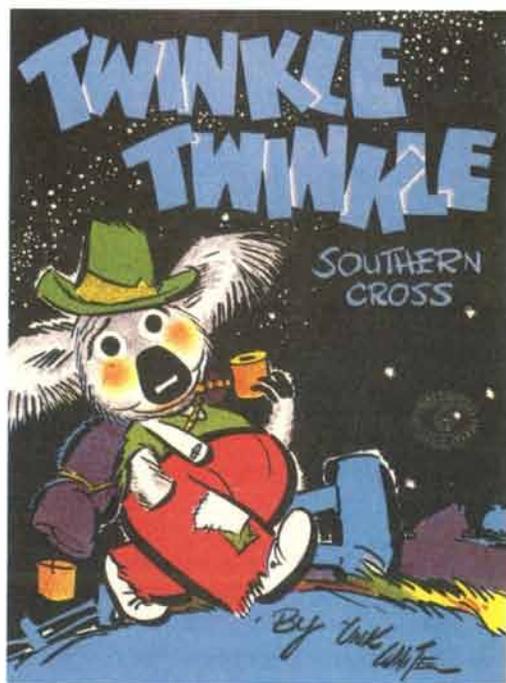
E.L. Martin  
from C.J. DeGaris, ed., *'Sun-Raysed' Children's Fairy Story*  
Book (1919)

Centre. *Little Miss Muffet* (1918), a rare shaped novelty for the Australian nursery.

Below. Printings of traditional nursery rhymes were always likely to overwhelm any local attempt and none more so than Barbara Macdonald's *A New Book of Old Rhymes* (1920).

Right. *Bush Babs* (1933) is the most accessible collection of D.H. Souter's rhymes.





These three representative Australian nursery printings from the 1940s range from an unmistakable item of Australiana by Unk White, through less culture-specific work by Harold Charles to traditional rhymes illustrated by Peg Maltby.

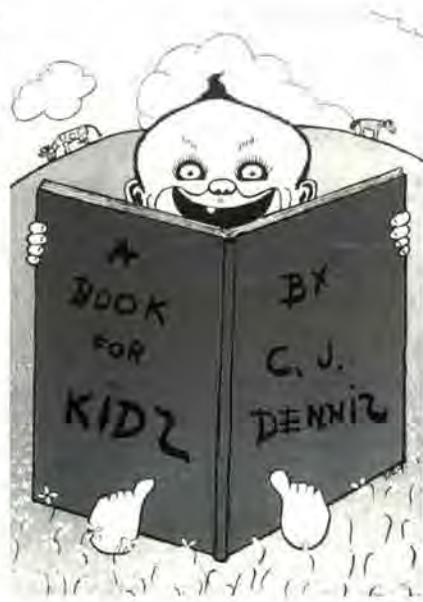
## Chapter 6

# 1920s Nursery Versery

### 'As I was going ... from Bourke to Gundagai'

C.J. Dennis' *A Book for Kids*, either whole or in part, in selections from Dennis' total output or as individual poems in anthologies, has remained current in Australian nurseries since its first publication in 1921 and it is rightly regarded as a classic Australian children's book. Its success provided ongoing encouragement and example to some Australian children's poets in the move away from the overly sentimental and fantasy-oriented subjects which had dominated our children's verse and into more robust territory. While A.A. Milne at much the same time on the English scene was capturing its nursery life and pastimes, Dennis was depicting the spirit of the less cosseted and constrained Australian child.

Dennis' reputation and achievement, however, eclipsed a significant volume of children's verse published only the year before *A Book for Kids* appeared. The poetic potential in young Australia's pastimes and viewpoints as captured in brief verses untrammelled by patriotic sentiments, moral



restrictions or the overseeing eye of a patronising adult was first realised in Leslie Allen's *Billy-Bubbles*. Allen's work was a modestly produced booklet, unillustrated and even somewhat austere in its presentation, while Dennis' work was a much more imposing large quarto. Much of the visual appeal of *A Book for Kids* was generated by its colour cover which, together with the textual illustrations, were by Dennis himself.

The cover was unprecedented on the Australian children's book scene in terms of its bold, even crude and eye-catching graphic. The most popular illustrations in Australian children's books at this time were delicate and refined fantasy works such as

had been popularised by Ida Rentoul Outhwaite. Dennis' alarming, impish, wide-eyed figure makes immediate contact with the viewer; there are no concessions here to adult conceptions of sentimental child beauty! The result is a naive graphic of great strength which heralds the type of verse

within: vernacular, robust and direct. Faced with all this it is no wonder that Leslie Allen's *Billy-Bubbles* was largely overshadowed and has been forgotten today.

When Allen's book was at the printers, George Robertson invited him to contribute nursery rhymes to the Angus & Robertson anthology and some of these contributions appeared later in a second edition of *Billy-Bubbles* published in 1924. Allen dealt with nursery life and humour, with innocent pastimes and the self-centred imaginative territory of the young and it is a pity that he never produced another volume of children's verse. Even so, in its day it must have surprised many that an erudite scholar like Allen could produce even this one volume of simple and unpatronising verse for an audience which was absolutely at the opposite end of the scale from his usual one.

Leslie Holdsworth Allen (1879–1964) would, in fact, have been a more likely choice than Zora Cross as the compiler of Angus & Robertson's anthology of rhymes. They had published his first volume of classical poems and prose in 1913 and he was widely respected and known as a figure of diverse cultural interests. He was a noted classical scholar and lecturer with a Ph.D. from the University of Leipzig, and when the nursery rhyme anthology was first mooted he had just taken up a post as Professor of English at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, Canberra; a post which he was to hold until 1930. Here his relatively undemanding academic duties allowed him to indulge his multifarious interests in Australian art, the theatre, translation, literary criticism and writing poetry.

The format of Allen's *Billy-Bubbles* is restrained, more befitting a volume of classical translations from its scholarly author. The verse itself, however, belies this restraint and is exuberant, entertaining and aimed directly at a young

audience with no hint of condescension, or of an overseeing adult with one eye to a more mature audience. Much of the verse, in fact, reveals a true poet's keen eye for the style and metre of the nursery rhyme:

### Teddy Bear

Teddy Bear  
Sat on a chair,  
With ham and jam  
And plum and pear.

'This is queer,'  
Said Teddy Bear,  
'The more I eat  
The less is there!'

Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (1920)

### Puff-tail Peter

Puff-tail Peter  
Lives in a burrow.  
He nibbles the wheat  
In the farmer's furrow.  
He pops up his head  
Like a Jack-in-the-box,  
And pops it down,  
When he sees Bill Fox.

Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (1920)

### Bluey

Bluey the cow  
She lies and blinks.  
I wonder now  
What Bluey thinks!

She chews her cud  
 In dozy drowse,  
 What *do* they think  
 Those sleepy cows?

Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (1920)

### Big Billy Bim-Bam

Big Billy Bim-Bam  
 Go to school!  
 Don't play all day  
 By the fishes' pool.  
 You've been a lazy boy  
 Months and months,  
 Big Billy, Big Billy, dunce, dunce, dunce!

Pert Polly Ping-Pong  
 Go to school!  
 Don't wander daylong  
 Gathering wool.  
 Days pass, weeks pass,  
 You haven't been once,  
 Pert Polly, Pert Polly, dunce, dunce, dunce!

Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (1920)

The counting rhyme, 'Thistledown', is a variation of a classic nursery rhyme and like much of the book's other verse encourages recitation with its forthright rhymes, its effective repetition and its unflinching sense of rhythm:

### Thistledown

Thistledown, Thistledown,  
 One, two, three!  
 What shall I wish for?  
 What shall it be?

'I'll have a dolly!  
 'A drum for me!  
 Thistledown, Thistledown,  
 One, two, three!

Thistledown, Thistledown,  
 Four, five, six!  
 All shut your eyes tight  
 While each one picks!  
 'Mine is a trumpet!  
 'Mine lolly-sticks!  
 Thistledown, Thistledown,  
 Four, five, six!

Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (1920)

In 1923 Allen wrote to George Robertson concerning the fate of the nursery rhymes he had submitted to Angus & Robertson's projected anthology:

I wish you'd let me have back those nursery rhymes. I have no copy, & I want to include some of them in a new edition of *Billy-Bubbles*.<sup>53</sup>

The most memorable of these verses was 'The Locust':

I had a little locust no bigger than my thumb.  
 I put him in a match-box, and there I bade him drum.  
 I opened up the match-box, to see if he was there—  
 'Buzz!' went the locust, and flew into the air.

Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (2nd edn, 1924)

In the enlarged second edition of 1924, Allen continued C.J. Dennis' effective use of Australian place names with the same touch of the nonsensical in his verse 'Penrith':

As I was going to Penrith  
 I met two Chinamen with

A great big gun  
 And a hot cross bun  
 To catch a speckled hen with.  
 Leslie H. Allen, *Billy-Bubbles* (2nd edn. 1924)



The publishing opportunities for poets writing children's verse have always been limited and perhaps Angus & Robertson's nursery rhyme anthology was not the only project in this line to be abandoned. Furthermore, we would be mistaken if we judged publication in book form as the sole forum for the popularisation of children's verse. Special 'Children's Pages' or 'Columns', sometimes part of a 'Women's Page', have been a popular part of many Australian newspapers since late last century. The inspiration which editors of such pages—like Ethel Turner in *The Australian Town and Country Journal*, Mary Gilmore in *The Australian Worker* and Amy Mack in the *Sydney Morning Herald*—brought to the task, gave encouragement to many writers of verse for children as well as to child poets themselves. Three newspapers which, in the early twentieth century, consistently featured verse by significant poets were the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the (Melbourne) *Leader* and the (Melbourne) *Herald*. It was usually a page in the Saturday issue of these newspapers which featured such work; the most notable, perhaps, being C.J. Dennis' page in the *Herald* of the 1920s which featured verse for adult and child alike.

Almost all of this ephemeral writing is an untapped mine of verse for young Australians; the laborious page turning involved in unearthing these items is a daunting task.

However, when we consider that in the 1920s in the *Sydney Morning Herald* alone such successful authors of verse for children as Alan Mickle, Edyth Bavin, Launcelot Harrison, Ruth Bedford and Leslie H. Allen were contributors, then the significance of this ephemeral writing becomes clear. Precious little of this output has been collected and an anthology of such verse would greatly augment the canon of one genre of Australian children's literature. One of the very few exceptions to this lacunae is verse by E.T. Luke: his contributions to the *Leader* were published as a booklet in 1921 as *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes*.

Clippety, clopperty, clippety clop;  
 Gallop away till you come to a stop.  
 Off again cantering quietly along—  
 Hoofs beating time to the words of your song.  
 E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921)

Little Danny Dun,  
 Was a Mallee farmer's son,  
 And loved to chase the lambs about for fun, fun, fun.  
 A mother sheep one day,  
 Butted Danny right away,  
 And from the grassy paddock made him run, run, run.  
 E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921)

### The Southern Cross

See the Star-Cross in the sky,  
 Shining every night so high  
 In the south, o'er gum-trees tall,  
 Sign that Angels guard us all.  
 E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921)

### Peter's Plum

Peter, Peter, here's a plum;  
 Hold it with your tiny thumb,  
 Eat it slow as slow can be  
 Till the stone is all you see  
 Twixt your finger and your thumb—  
 'Peter, Peter, where's your plum?'

E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921)

### Baby in the Hay

Baby, Baby in the hay—  
 Got his Daddy's cap to-day.  
 Baby's proud as proud can be—  
 What a big brave man is he.

E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921)

### The Laughing Jackass

'Laughing Jack, Laughing Jack, Tell me, I pray,  
 How to be happy, like you every day.'  
 'How to be happy like me ev'ry day?  
 Laugh at your troubles, and they'll fly away.'

E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921)

Dennis' influence was also apparent in an engaging booklet published in 1922 entitled *Kangaroo Rhymes*. Its author, Stephen Grey, drew on the same educational demand and nationalistic zeal which had produced Jimmie Pannikin's *Thoughts for Teachers* in 1914. To that end, *Kangaroo Rhymes* contained a Foreword by the Director of Education in Victoria which provided a succinct summation of the contemporary interest in indigenous children's folklore and nursery rhymes:

The great nursery rhymes are folk-songs, born in the popular mouth and owing very little to conscious art ... Every nation has its songs, its verses, its tales dedicated to childhood and adolescence. Australia is slowly working out her salvation in this direction, but she is too young as yet to have much individuality. Her children still speak of the old world as Home, and learn the nursery rhymes of their mothers. With years will come tradition and a folklore to be the parent of a new world of wonder for our little people. Meanwhile local writers and artists are seeking to bridge the gap by creating for the children literature of a distinctively Australian flavor.<sup>54</sup>

The most successful nursery verses in *Kangaroo Rhymes* are two which build on traditional formulas. 'The Three Swagmen' uses the opening gambit 'As I was going ...' which has inspired almost a dozen classic nursery rhymes including 'As I Was Going to St. Ives'. Another of Grey's nursery verses, 'How Many Miles?', instantly recalls 'How Many Miles to Babylon?' However, what makes these two new rhymes so noteworthy is that, like C.J. Dennis, the author used actual Australian place names such as Lilydale, Bourke and Gundagai to extend the frontiers of nursery rhyme into Australian territory:

### How Many Miles?

'How many miles to Lilydale?  
 O, wise old walking man;  
 With your brown, brown face and tired eyes,  
 And your stick and billy-can.'

'How many miles to Lilydale?  
 'Tis many miles away;

Too many miles for little feet  
To travel in one day.'

'How many miles to Anywhere?  
O, tell me, if you can.'  
'The road is long and the hills are far,'  
Said the wise old walking man.

'Take me away to Anywhere,  
O, wise old walking man.'  
But he shook his head as he walked away,  
With his stick and his billy-can.  
Stephen Grey, *Kangaroo Rhymes* (1922)

### The Three Swagmen

As I was going down the road from Bourke to  
Gundagai, Sir,  
I met three swagmen by the way who each had but  
one eye, Sir;  
Two were dressed in dungarees, and one was clad in  
moleskins,  
None of them had shaved or washed, and none of  
them had whole skins.

When I said, 'Pray tell me why you are so very  
youthless,'  
Each man opened wide his mouth and it was black  
and toothless;  
None of them could speak a word, and none of them  
could hear me,  
So I went away again and nobody came near me.  
Stephen Grey, *Kangaroo Rhymes* (1922)

Leslie Allen was not the only prominent professor in the 1920s to find a respite from university duties through the composition of verse popular with a nursery audience.

Professor Launcelot Harrison (1880–1928) had a most distinguished academic career with a worldwide reputation culminating in his role as Challis Professor of Zoology at the University of Sydney in 1922. His wife, the children's author Amy Mack, had contributed some verses to the Angus & Robertson anthology and this may have been a catalyst to Harrison's own efforts published in 1925 as *Tails and Tarradiddles*. Certainly some of his more memorable brief verses are admissible as nursery rhymes:

### The Wallaby and the Bull-ant

The Wallaby sat on an ironbark stump,  
*Budgerie, Budgerie, Bingy—*  
Wondering how far he was able to jump,  
*Budgerie, Budgerie, Bingy.*



The Bull-ant sat on the Wallaby's tail,  
*Budgerie, Budgerie, Bingy—*  
 And the Wallaby started off full sail,  
*Budgerie, Budgerie, Bingy.*

The Bull-ant's face wore a satisfied smile,  
*Budgerie, Budgerie, Bingy—*  
 For the Wallaby found he could jump a mile,  
*Budgerie, Budgerie, Bingy.*

The Perfesser & Alter Ego [Launcelot Harrison], *Tails and Tarradiddles* (1925)

### The Fantail

Flit-a-  
 Flirt-a-  
 Fantail—  
 Flutter down the creek;  
 Once his tail  
 Is open,  
 Can't shut it for a week;  
 All he has  
 To sing about,  
 Just a little squeak;  
 All he has  
 For supper, just  
 A 'squito in his beak;  
 Flit-a-  
 Flirt-a-  
 Fantail—  
 Flutter down the creek.

The Perfesser & Alter Ego [Launcelot Harrison], *Tails and Tarradiddles* (1925)

### Possum up a Gum-tree

Possum up a gum-tree, look down at me;  
 Possum up a gum-tree, what do you see?  
 For your babies, bread of my baking;  
 For your lady, gown of my making;  
 For yourself, a shoe and a sock;  
 I have them all in the lap of my frock.

Possum up a gum-tree, come down to me;  
 A little girl is nicer than an old gum-tree.

The Perfesser & Alter Ego [Launcelot Harrison], *Tails and Tarradiddles* (1925)

Another item in this intermittent series of nursery publications appeared in the mid 1920s: *Cole's Happy Time Picture and Nursery Rhyme Book*. Today's audience could be excused for thinking that the Cole of the title was merely a tribute to Old King Cole of traditional nursery rhyme fame. However, E.W. Cole (1832–1918) was Australia's best-known bookseller last century and the compiler of the first classic Australian children's book, *Cole's Funny Picture Book* (1879). Most of Cole's publications were cutting-book type accumulations of verse, snippets of prose, short stories and illustrations culled from a very wide range of unacknowledged sources. However, *Cole's Happy Time Picture and Nursery Rhyme Book* was a significant deviation from this style. This was no mere compendium of copyright free nursery verse and illustrations: it is one of the very rare instances in which the services of both an Australian author and illustrator were commissioned to produce an entirely original new work. Lillian Pyke wrote forty-five nursery verses and an alphabet, and Percy Leason contributed eight full-page colour plates and thirty-two black and white line drawings.

Lillian Pyke (c.1881–1927) was more popularly known as a children’s novelist rather than a children’s poet and for a decade from 1916 until her death enjoyed popular success as a writer of school stories. Percy Leason (1889–1959) had contributed two illustrations to the *Bulletin’s Australian Nursery Rimes* of 1917, but is primarily remembered today for his humorous and satiric series of large black and white cartoons which graced the Sydney magazine *Table Talk* between 1926 and 1937 and chronicled the small town life of ‘Wiregrass’. Leason left for America in 1939 to pursue a more ‘serious’ art career.

Some of Pyke’s verses were extensions or variations of traditional nursery rhymes. While none of these rhymes are as defiantly Australian as earlier examples by Ruth Bedford, a number are still effective pieces of verse:

### Hot Pies

Little Jack Horner sat in a corner,  
Eating his Christmas pie,  
But Johnny forgot that mince pies are hot,  
(You wouldn’t, dear, nor would I),  
And so the big plum, burnt poor Johnny’s thumb,  
And made him loudly yell,  
But mother so kind, some oiled rag did find,  
And now his poor burnt thumb is well.

Lillian Pyke, *Cole’s Happy Time Picture and Nursery Rhyme Book* (c. 1925)

### Billy Tea

Polly put the billy on,  
Polly put the billy on,  
Polly put the billy on,  
And let’s have tea.

For this is our picnic day,  
Far from town we’ve come away,  
On the sand to shout and play,  
Let’s have tea.

With little sticks build up the fire  
That will make the flame rise higher,  
Of blowing it we never tire.  
See it boils.

Bring the little bag of tea,  
Just enough for you and me,  
Oh, how thirsty does the sea,  
Make us feel.  
Pass the baskets all around,  
Cakes and scones within are found,  
And of lollies quite a pound.  
Oh, what joy!

Soon our little feast is o’er,  
We can eat and drink no more,  
Come let’s down on to the shore,  
Jump and run.

Polly take the billy off,  
Polly take the billy off,  
Polly take the billy off,  
They’ve all gone away.

Lillian Pyke, *Cole’s Happy Time Picture and Nursery Rhyme Book* (c. 1925)

It was also during the 1920s that a considerable repertoire of Australian nursery songs began to accumulate. One such item stands pre-eminent in this repertoire—Marion Sinclair’s ‘Kookaburra’:

Kookaburra sits on an old gum tree,  
Merry, merry king of the bush is he.  
Laugh, kookaburra, laugh, kookaburra  
Gay your life must be.

This is certainly the best-known round song ever taught in Australian schools and so widespread is its popularity that it has achieved one characteristic of folklore: some reprintings credit it to anonymous or traditional sources! As such, the Australian Government's report on folklife in Australia quoted it as a specific example of dislocation of authorial rights by 'the natural process of selection and adaptation whereby folklife evolves within the community'.<sup>55</sup> The song's popularity has even breached national boundaries: a recent edition presented it as 'an Australian folk song that has been part of camp and conference experience for many American young people'.<sup>56</sup> It is thus possible to assert that 'Kookaburra' is *the* premier example of an indigenous Australian nursery rhyme.

One collection of nursery songs typical of the 1920s is *Gum-Trees* (1925) which exhibits all the period charm of the decade both in its layout as well as in the quality of its words and music. These seven Australian songs



were a collaborative effort, with words by Jane de Burgh and music by Mirrie Solomon (later Mirrie Hill). The layout of the work was greatly enhanced by illustrations which make this one of the most appealing nursery items of the decade.

### Little Brother Possum

Little brother 'possum  
Ventures out at night,  
Nibbles at the gum-leaves,  
'Cause they're nice to bite.

When the morning's coming  
And the sky grows red,  
Shoo! little 'possum,  
Hurry back to bed.

Jane de Burgh, *Gum-Trees* (1925)

### Tinkle, Tinkle, Cow-bells

Tinkle, tinkle, cowbells,  
Milking time is here;  
All the cows are coming home,  
Sunset's very near.

Tinkle, tinkle, milkcans,  
Riding in the train;  
Baby's cup awaits you here,  
To be filled again.

Jane de Burgh, *Gum-Trees*  
(1925)

## The Wallaby Rat

Bright little eyes, sharp little nose,  
Hopping away in a hurry he goes;  
Peeping again to see what you're at,  
Nice little, shy little, wallaby rat.

Nibbles dry grass, hops to the creek,  
But there's been no water for over a week;  
Now with this fare, he won't get too fat,  
Poor little, dear little, wallaby rat.

Jane de Burgh, *Gum-Trees* (1925)



## Chapter 6

# Nursery Rhymes for a Depressed Australia

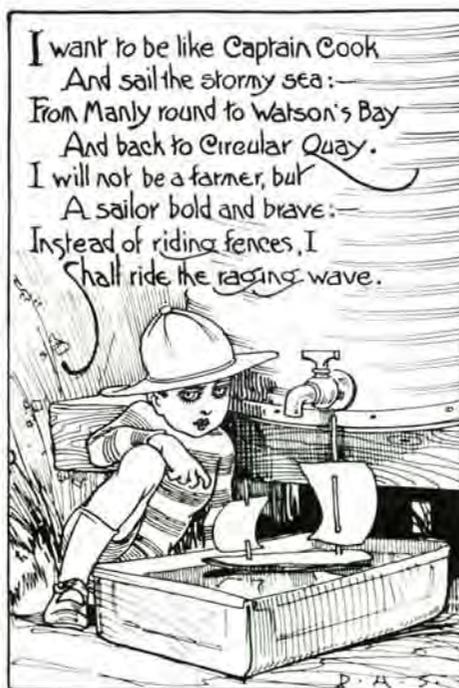
### 'I want to be like Captain Cook'

In the lead up to the Depression of the 1930s an interest in promoting Australian nursery rhymes, or even children's literature in general, was understandably distracted by the stern economic realities and deprivations of the time:

Goosey, Goosey, Taxpayer,  
When will you ponder  
On the sin of taxing work  
For Parliament to squander.  
*Anon, Nursery Rhymes for the  
Unemployed (193-)*

Ruth Bedford, who had actually been responsible for energising Angus & Robertson's nursery rhyme project, contributed two last nursery rhymes to a children's magazine in 1924 and then retired from the field. One of these reads:

Wallaby, Wallaby, run, run, run!  
Out in the paddocks and under the sun;  
Over the fences and down to the creek!  
Don't you stop running till Saturday week!



Wallaby, Wallaby, stop, stop, stop!  
I want to watch you and see how you  
hop.  
Stay with me, play with me under the  
gums,  
And don't run away until Christmas  
comes!  
*Ruth Bedford, 'Nursery rhymes',  
Junior Australians (January 1924)*

Angus & Robertson's burst of publishing activity in children's literature which started with May Gibbs' booklets in 1916 slowed down considerably after 1925. During this decade they established a new imprint—the Cornstalk Publishing Company—primarily for modest and usually abridged reprints such as the Gumnut Readers series of 1929. They published only two new Gibbs titles between 1926 and 1930, and these both appeared under the Cornstalk imprint. No other new and significant children's titles were issued by Angus & Robertson during these years and this decline of interest effectively

brought to a close a classic period of writing and illustrating for Australian children.

The depressed thirties were hardly conducive to encouraging the publication of children's verse. Indeed, one of the most telling uses of the nursery rhyme format at this time was for an adult audience. The Henry George League which had originated in England and had an active offshoot in Melbourne, was campaigning for social justice and political economy. The League's platform of democratic government through proportional representation was popularised in a booklet with the unambiguous title, *Nursery Rhymes for the Unemployed*. Here they appropriated traditional nursery rhyme characters and formats to further their criticism of the government and champion the workers' cause:

### Jack and Jill

Jack and Jill went up the Hill  
To sink a well for Water.  
We Tax their Rope,  
We Tax their Tools,  
I do not think we ought to.

*Anon, Nursery Rhymes for the Unemployed (193-)*

### Little Boy Blue

Little Boy Blue, come blow up your horn,  
There are thieves in the meadows and thieves in the corn.  
These are politicians who cannot sleep  
Till they've put a tax on all that we eat.  
So waken up and have a try  
To put honest men in the Ministry.

*Anon, Nursery Rhymes for the Unemployed (193-)*

### Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Twinkle, twinkle, unjust tax  
Placed upon the workers' backs.  
Up above their reach so high—  
Keeps them scratching till they die.

And the landlord in the park  
Thanks you for your good fat spark,  
For to work he'd have to go  
If you did not twinkle so.

*Anon, Nursery Rhymes for the Unemployed (193-)*

### Georgie, Porgie

Georgie, Porgie, Parliament Pie,  
Taxed the Workers and made them cry.  
When Henry George has had his say  
Georgie, Porgie will run away.

*Anon, Nursery Rhymes for the Unemployed (193-)*

The only significant addition to the nursery rhyme genre during the 1930s was that made by D.H. Souter in his *Bush Babs* of 1933. David Henry Souter (1862–1935) is today remembered solely for his sophisticated *Bulletin* cartoons which often featured his trademark of the slinking, sinuous cat. In his day, however, Souter was a creative personality of diverse talents: playwright, novelist, journalist, illustrator and cartoonist. An even less known achievement is his contribution to Australian nursery rhyme lore.

Souter was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, and seems to have been a self-taught artist and journalist. He arrived in Sydney in 1887, a few years after the *Bulletin* was first published. This was the newspaper with which Souter was to become intimately associated and which was to popularise his

name throughout Australia. He quickly assimilated into the cultural and social life of Sydney and began turning out a welter of chic and amusing pen and ink cartoons and decorative illustrations: magazines and newspapers, textbooks, children's books and postcards all benefited from Souter's stylish pen.

And if Souter's *métier* was small and ephemeral, his reputation in his day was considerable and he was one whose talent and contribution to black and white art in Australia has been somewhat overshadowed by Norman Lindsay. Souter's artistic contributions to the *Bulletin* alone could have numbered several thousand and this coherent, if scattered, body of work is itself sufficient to cause a re-evaluation of his place in our art history. It is time that this imbalance was redressed to allow David Henry Souter to emerge as one of the finest pen and ink artists in Australia's history.

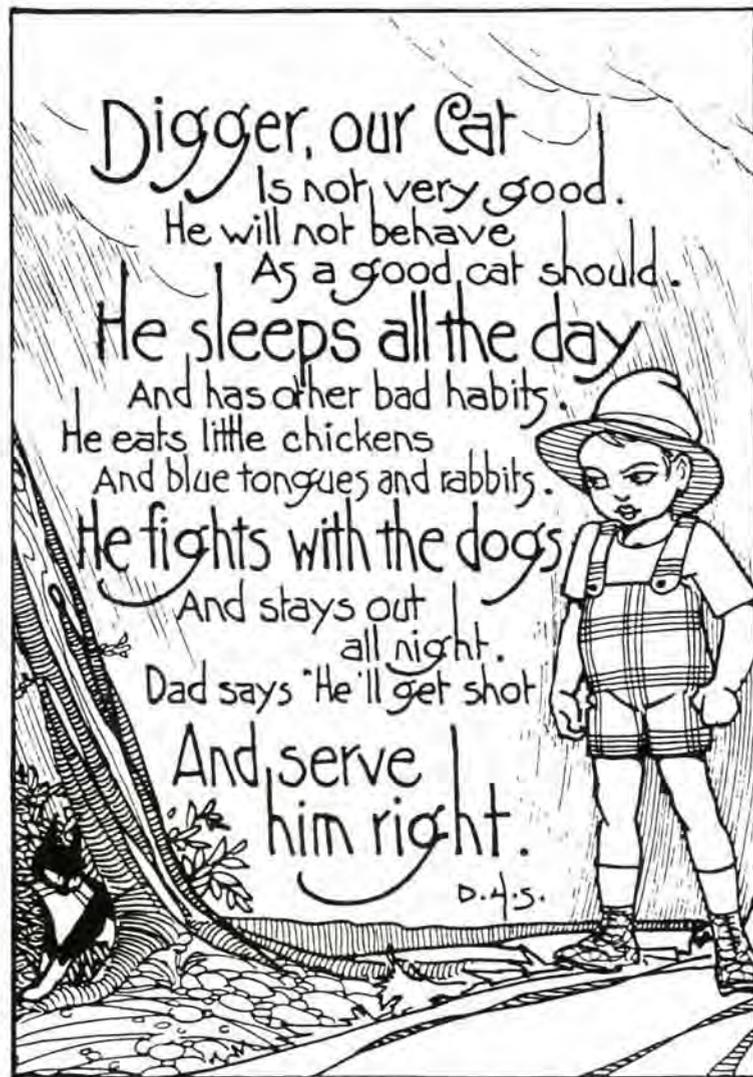
What is at least recognised is Souter's place in the history of children's book publishing and illustrating. The production of children's books in Australia is almost exclusively a twentieth-century phenomenon and two of its most outstanding turn-of-the-century examples were both illustrated by Souter: *Bubbles, His Book* (1899) and Ethel Turner's *Gum Leaves* (1900). In the latter work, Turner's verbal ingenuity and wordplay inspired Souter to produce some of his most amusing and light-hearted illustrations. It is regrettable that the two were not involved in other major projects in which their talents could have been combined again in such a complementary manner.

Souter himself was most adept at wordplay and wielded as felicitous a pen with language as he did with the drawn line. The succinct and witty captions he wrote to his

numerous *Bulletin* cartoons for almost fifty years were another side of the talent which used incantatory cadences and clever rhymes for a young audience. In 1917 he was the only contributor to have more than one 'rime' printed in the *Bulletin's* competition booklet. A decade later he consolidated that distinction by writing and illustrating a number of entertaining new rhymes for the children's magazine *Young Australia*. Each of these new verses was produced in a distinctive calligraphic script and set within a decorative ink drawing of immediate appeal. Souter's earlier verse had stood out for its humour, inventiveness and catching rhythms and in 1928 and 1929 he showed that he had lost nothing of his skill.

Clippity, clippity, clippity-clop;  
Round by the stock-route the creek and the crop.  
Gallop horses and gallop dogs,  
Dodging the rabbit-holes, jumping the logs.  
When they get tired the horses will stop,  
Then, we'll come home again, Clippity-clop.  
D.H. Souter, *Young Australia*, no. 55 (21 May 1928)

The little Blue Wren goes tweet, tweet, tweet,  
Hopping about after something to eat.  
Throw her a crumb and you will know then,  
You've helped to make happy  
A little Blue Wren.  
D.H. Souter, *Young Australia*, no. 58 (20 August 1928)



Listen to the little lamb's 'Ba-ba.'  
That's them calling for their ma-ma.

Every mama ewe shews her baby lamb,  
Where the grass is in the paddock  
And the water in the dam.

And here's a little bed  
For it go to sleep  
And grow up in the night to be  
A nice, woolly sheep.

D.H. Souter, *Young Australia*, no. 61 (20 November 1928)

Sandy is a Shearer  
Who has shorn so many sheep,  
He does not need to keep awake,  
He shears them in his sleep.

That isn't Sandy snoring:—  
It is only Sandy shoring:—  
He is so smart at shearing sheep  
He shears them in his sleep.

D.H. Souter, *Young Australia*, no. 62 (20 December 1928)

When I grow up  
I'm going to be  
A Cricketer, and play  
In Interstate and Test, and make  
A record every day.

Whatever stuff  
they pitch at me;  
Across the fence  
I'll nick it:  
And:—  
When I bowl,  
I'll be the one

That collars every wicket,  
But if I don't, at least you'll know,  
I gave them all  
A dinkum go.

D.H. Souter, *Young Australia*, no. 64 (20 February 1929)

Up at our place,  
We've got a new brother.  
He sleeps all day  
In bed beside mother.

He hasn't any hair!  
His eyes are shut tight;  
He's got no teeth;  
But they say he's alright.  
If ever I buy a brother of my own;  
I bet they won't sell me one half-grown.

D.H. Souter, *Young Australia*, no. 65 (20 March 1929)

In 1932 one of the most significant anthologies of Australian children's verse was published: *Frolic Fair* was specifically addressed to children under ten and even today, sixty years later, it remains as a sensitive gleaning of some of the best verse for young Australians. Of particular note is that for the first time in fifteen years four of the *Bulletin's* Australian nursery 'rimes' were back in print and thus available to a new generation. One of these was Souter's 'The Man from Menindie' and this renewed interest was almost certainly the catalyst which prompted Souter to collect, rewrite and extend his repertoire of nursery rhymes into his very last book: *Bush Babs* (1933).

As befitting the most important nursery rhyme collection of the decade, Souter's book was presented in a striking and innovative cover, the like of which had not been seen since C.J. Dennis' *A Book for Kids* of 1921! *Bush Babs* remains

Souter's most accessible body of writing for children and while much children's literature from this period may seem dated and unnecessarily cute, Souter's nursery rhymes retain their robust nature and humour and are well suited to active recitation.

### And the 'Roo Jumped Over the Moon

THE KANGAROO is a splendid jumper;  
Short forelegs, but its tail is a thumper.

Whether it be a girl or a boy  
A baby 'roo is always a joey.

Its Ma has a pocket in front of her tum  
For baby to lie in, sucking its thumb.

Of all the babes that are born, but few  
Have a pram like the baby kangaroo.

D.H. Souter, *Bush Babs* (1933)

### The Kat-garoo

THE KANGAROO CAT, or the Katgaroo,  
Has, so far, only been seen by few.  
For Somebody, only the other day, drew  
The identical one that is looking at you.  
'There's no such animal,' Some people said;  
Somebody smiled and nodded his head.

'You have Kangaroo Rats,  
So why shouldn't you  
Have Kangaroo Cats  
Or a Katgaroo?'

D.H. Souter, *Bush Babs* (1933)

### Our Pet Lambs

*Mary had a little lamb—  
Ted and me have five;  
And it took some doing  
Keeping them alive.*

Feeding 'em, and all the time  
Them buttin' us an' trippin' us;  
And everybody on the place  
Chivvyin' an' chippin' us.

Wait till they are grown up  
An' got a bit o' sense.  
They won't be pokin' borak  
when  
Our wool brings forty-pence.  
D.H. Souter, *Bush Babs*  
(1933)

### A Time for Everything

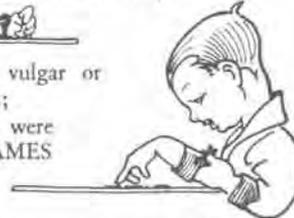
Listen to the cackle of the  
bantam hen.  
She always likes to lay an egg at  
half-past ten.  
As soon as she has laid it, she  
feels quite proud  
And struts around the fowlyard and clucks out loud.  
  
The big white rooster tells her 'Cock-a-doodle-doo;  
A half-past-ten egg's the right thing to do.'  
And all the other hens go and lay one, too.  
D.H. Souter, *Bush Babs* (1933)

"BELIEVE IT — OR BELIEVE IT NOT — —AS MEN THEY WERE A SPLENDID LOT—



JOSEPH and JAMES  
were such nice  
little boys,  
Jigsaws and chess were their  
favorite toys.

They never played vulgar or  
dangerous games;  
Such nice little boys were  
JOSEPH and JAMES



PETER and PAUL were rougher than bags,  
Their hair always tousled,  
their clothing in rags.



If anyone anywhere  
heard of a brawl,  
They knew where to look  
for PETER and PAUL.



—OBSERVE THE  
LOVELY HATS  
THEY'VE GOT"

PETER and JOSEPH  
and JAMES and PAUL  
Grew up to be very  
fine men after all.  
And no one could tell—  
without  
knowing their names  
JOSEPH from PAUL  
or PETER  
from  
JAMES.

Sammy the Swaggie  
Has a big brown swag;  
A little black billy and a white tucker-bag,  
A blue cattle-dog and a very red nose;  
And they all go with him wherever he goes.  
D.H. Souter, *Bush Babs* (1933)

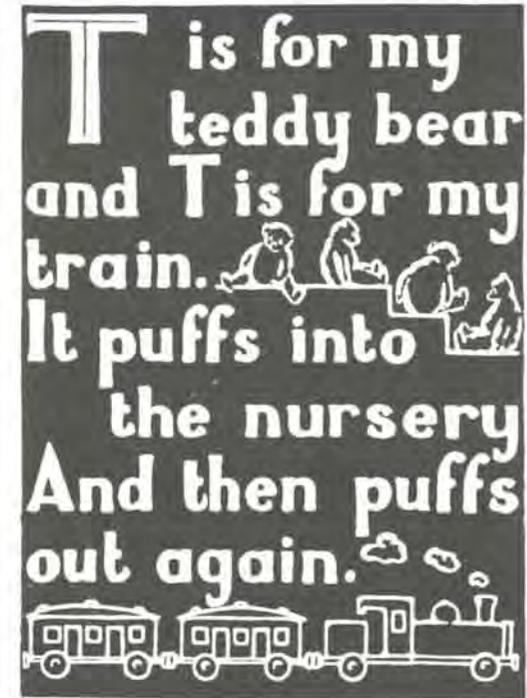
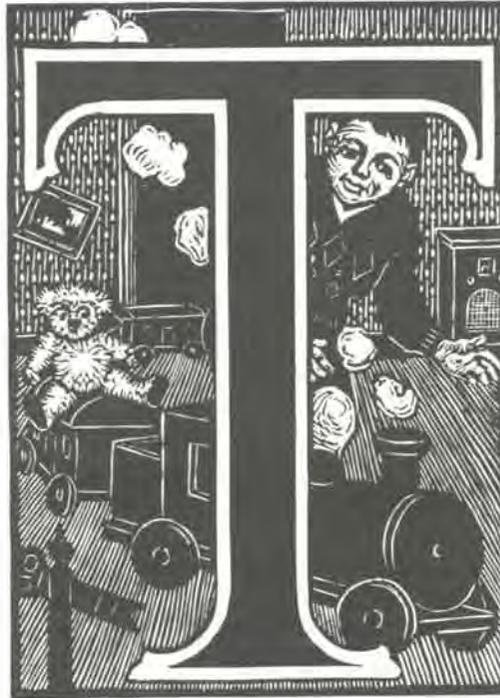
*Bush Babs* consolidated Souter's long-term interest in the composition of Australian nursery rhymes: between 1917

and 1933 the fascination of the nursery rhyme genre maintained its hold and he added gradually to his repertoire. This body of verse makes Souter one of the most prolific and capable of our nursery poets. His dual ability with text and illustration established a mastery which none have equalled. The only other really stylish nursery item of the decade, indeed the only other really stylish Australian children's book of the decade, was a hand-crafted *ABC: An Alphabet, Being a Book of Designs & Rhymes* (1932).

This rather pedestrian title belies a book of great charm and graphic variety. Twenty-six students in the Applied Art School of the Melbourne Working Men's College took one letter of the alphabet each, wrote a simple rhyme and accompanied it with a linocut illustration. The guiding genius behind this alphabet was Napier Waller, newly-appointed senior art teacher at the College. Waller had taken up this post in February 1932 and was a highly-respected printmaker, mosaic and mural artist, and stained-glass window designer. His indefatigable example was obviously an inspiration to his new students and their alphabet is a remarkable tribute to his wit and energy.

If it were not for Souter's sustained literary interest the Australian nursery of the 1930s would have relied almost

entirely on imported rhymes. Very few other Australian poets of the decade addressed a nursery age audience and we have to be particularly diligent to unearth their contributions.



### New Children

All new children come at night,  
 Ushered in by candle light;  
 If the night has just begun  
 It will surely be a son;  
 But the time that girls are born  
 Is just before the early morn.

Geoffrey Butler, *Under Age* (1932)

### 'Bun Bun Bunny'

Bun Bun Bunny sitting on a hill,  
Up comes a hunter,  
Keep quite still.  
Quickly he has seen you  
Bang! goes the gun  
Right into your burrow you must  
Run bunny run.

Wynnefred Fisher-Webster, *Australian Songs for Australian Children* (1933)

### Katie Cat

Oh, what can Katie Cat  
Be at,  
And what can she be doing?

She's doing nothing, it would seem,  
But looking round for cream, cream, cream,  
And mewling, mewling, mewling!

[Kenneth Slessor], *Funny Farmyard* (1933)

### The Tram Bell

Clatter, clatter, noisy bell,  
On the busy tram.  
Will you tell the motorman  
To stop for me and Sam?

Clatter, clatter, noisy bell,  
All the way to town.  
Clatter, clatter, every time  
Any one gets down.

Ida Scott, *Songs of This and That: for the Little Ones* (1933)

### The Pig in the Sack

Clickity-click! Clickity-clack!  
Hear the wheels on the railway track.  
Clickity-click! Clickity-clack!  
All the way to the town and back.

Clickity-click! Clickity-clack!  
To market I go with a pig in a sack.  
Clickity-click! Clickity-clack!  
I put my pig in the luggage-rack.

Clickity-click! Clickity-clack!  
The wheels are dancing along the track.  
Clickity, Clickity, Clickity-clack!  
My pig fell out of the luggage-rack.  
Ida Scott, *Songs of This and That: for the Little Ones* (1933)

### Little Tommy Tucker

Little Tommy Tucker  
Was feeling gay and bright;  
In dreams he saw the supper  
He was to have to-night.  
Little Tommy Tucker  
Is feeling very sad;  
In dreams he sees the supper  
That to-night he had.

Ida Scott, *Songs of This and That: for the Little Ones* (1933)

### Oh, Huntsman, Please!

Oh, Huntsman, please, do blow your horn;  
The crows are eating up all the corn:  
The crows are coarse and the crows are fat.  
(And remarkably coarse and fat at that.)

And they caw out loud and make such a fuss  
That they get many things that are meant for us.  
So, Huntsman, please, do blow your horn,  
And try and frighten them from the corn.  
Please blow, blow, blow with all your might,  
Else we'll be starved by Wednesday night.

Alan D. Mickle, *Pemmican Pete and Other Verses: for Children of all Ages* (1934)

### Ring a Ring of Roses

Ring a ring of roses,  
For its Summer time,  
Wipe your Winter noses,  
I've just wiped mine.

Smell the sunny grasses,  
Warm and sweet as hay,  
Soon the summer passes,  
Hey, willy nay.

Ring a ring of Pansies,  
Soft and shy they are,  
Wing your baby fancies,  
To each bright star.

Sing a song of sixpence,  
With pockets full of sky,  
Childhood's sweet existence  
Is soon blown bye.

Ring a ring of Rosies,  
Soon 'tis winter time,  
Gather summer posies;  
I have gathered mine.

Brian Vrepont, *Oh Marjorie Ann* (1936)

### Ba, Ba, Black Sheep

Ba, ba, black sheep,  
Have you been to school?  
Yes Sir, Yes Sir,  
For six day's full.

But, but, black sheep,  
Why are you so late?  
Please Sir, please Sir,  
I broke my little slate.

Ba, ba, black sheep,  
You're a naughty thing;  
Yes Sir, but Sir,  
I've been a'gipsying.

Now, now, black sheep,  
Promise you'll be good;  
Oh Sir, yes Sir,  
That is understood.

Tut, tut, don't weep,  
Sweet Oh Marjorie Ann;  
Oh Sir, Oh Sir,  
You *are* a lovely man.

Wake up, black sheep,  
Hey! it's time for school;  
Oh dear, oh dear,  
My eyes are full of wool.

Brian Vrepont, *Oh Marjorie Ann* (1936)

## Chapter 8

# Rhymes for the Times

### ‘Twinkle, twinkle, Southern Cross’

By the end of the 1930s there were few heirs to the poets of earlier decades who had written significant verse for Australian children. Of those poets who had a volume of such verse to their credit by the late 1930s, only Ruth Bedford, Annie Rentoul and Mary Gilmore managed to repeat the achievement: C.J. Dennis, Leslie H. Allen, Furnley Maurice, Launcelot Harrison, Ethel Turner, Karna Birmingham, Zora Cross, Alan Mickle and D.H. Souter are only known by a single volume of children’s verse each. Our two most outstanding figures from this period, D.H. Souter and C.J. Dennis, both died in the 1930s and a new generation of Australian poets producing a significant and sustained output of verse for children did not appear until the 1960s.

World War II was nothing like the imaginative catalyst which its predecessor had been in terms of the production of Australian children’s literature. If the gumnut babies and their allies battling the banksia men in 1918 were a microcosmic rendition of another more global conflict, there was no such equivalent in Australian children’s literature in the 1940s. Furthermore, with one obvious exception, there was not a significant children’s illustrated book produced during these war years in Australia at all. And even in its day this exception,

Elizabeth Durack’s *Way of the Whirlwind* (1941), was itself something of an anachronism: its folio size with bejewelled, tipped-in colour plates offset by generous borders harks back to the earlier years of the century and contains no hint of wartime austerity or sentiment.

However, what did proliferate during these years of paper rationing and restrictions were more ephemeral children’s publications printed at low cost, in large numbers and marketed more as stationery lines than standard bookselling items. When printers and stationers entered the publishing arena the quality of Australian children’s book production (except in the hands of John Sands) reached its lowest point. Traditional nursery literature, tales and rhymes were particularly chosen as texts by these inexperienced new entrepreneurs: they were familiar imaginative territory to all and involved no new commissioning of texts, they were copyright free and they faced little if any competition from foreign printings.

Very little local nursery verse was produced for wartime Australian children. As a copyright-free vehicle for displaying the talents of a second generation of Australian fantasy illustrators, these booklets inundated Australian nurseries with

little of any quality. Connie Christie, Kay Druce, Jean Elder, Peg Maltby *et al.* introduced a new pictorial vocabulary that devalued the fantasy tradition in Australian illustration.<sup>57</sup>

These crudely produced printings demanded an approach to illustration that was far removed from the earlier fantasy tradition of the 1920s with its lavish ornamentation and sophisticated style. The new demands of the 1940s printings were for a much simplified style with broad washes of colour. The basic need was to produce a cheap item for the mass market and the result was that many of the illustrations were bland and uninspired, often with little to differentiate the style of different illustrators. Even when someone formerly as accomplished as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite was lured back into producing a nursery rhyme volume after ten years of absence from the book illustrating scene the result was disappointingly lacklustre.<sup>58</sup>

The National Library of Australia's *Australian National Bibliography, 1901–1950* (1988) lists at least forty such titles primarily produced at the very end of the war years. To this total we can add at least a further fifteen titles from other bibliographical sources. This is a range of publications starting in the early 1940s, peaking in the most prolific year of 1945 and then declining to 1949; from the anonymously illustrated works of the early 1940s to those by recognised illustrators in the mid 1940s followed by Kay Druce and Rufus Morris immediately thereafter.

While there seemed little interest in composing indigenous nursery rhymes there was a slight predilection for extending or retelling traditional nursery rhymes. This was usually done to provide alternative happy endings although the final result, unfortunately, provided bland nursery pap as these rhymes were divested of imaginative rigour and robust appeal:

### Little Miss Muffet

Little Miss Muffet  
Sat on a tuffet,  
Eating of curds and whey;  
There came a big spider,  
And sat down beside her,  
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Then Boy Blue came by  
And took her up high  
On a big downy feather so white;  
They watched the birds play  
Till the end of the day,  
And floated home safely at night.

Frederick O. Barnett, *Happy Endings to Old Nursery Rhymes* (1947)

### Baa, Baa, Black Sheep

Baa, baa, black sheep,  
Have you any wool?  
Yes, sir; yes, sir,  
Three bags full:  
One for my master,  
One for my dame,  
But none for the little boy  
That cried down the lane.

Little boy, little boy,  
Where do you go?  
Through lane and meadow where  
Buttercups grow.

Little boy, little boy,  
Why do you stay?  
The black sheep is standing  
There in the way.

Little boy, little boy,  
 Why do you cry?  
 The black sheep is bleating:  
 Why cannot I?

Eve Pownall, *Nursery Rhymes Told Anew* (c.1950).

Nursery rhymes are by their very nature economic verses whose brevity of line and action encompasses just enough for very young minds to handle and no more. These authors of nursery rhyme extensions were inevitably making the verses into extended narrative and moving well away from the realm of nursery rhyme by attempting to impose logical conclusions to their tales. According to the Opies there was something like a fashion for these extensions in England and America at the time.<sup>59</sup>

Among the very few attempts at producing nursery verse for Australian children during the war years was a robust example written and illustrated by the Sydney cartoonist Unk White: *Twinkle Twinkle Southern Cross* (1943). Its local setting and eye-catching illustrations contrasted with the rather effete and sentimental approach of other traditional fare and the work's appeal is as fresh today as it was almost fifty years ago.

### Twinkle, Twinkle, Southern Cross

Twinkle, Twinkle, Southern Cross  
 What you are, I'm at a loss

Up above the world so high  
 You look like diamonds in the sky

When the blazing sun is gone  
 When he nothing shines upon

Then you show your little stars  
 Like lights of fairy motor-cars

Then your bright and tiny spark  
 Lights the swaggy in the dark

Then you show your little beams  
 To light the way to happy dreams

Now Mrs Roo in all the dark  
 Thanks you for a tiny spark

How could she see which way to go  
 If you did not twinkle so?

On my roof the wombat plays  
 Basking in your silvery rays

Happy as a lark to be  
 'Twixt the sky and you and me

One two three—and then two more  
 At school we learn that's over four

But what you are, I'm at a loss  
 You've got me thinking, Southern Cross

In the dark blue sky you keep  
 And often through my curtains peep

For you never shut your eye  
 'Til the sun is in the sky.

Unk White, *Twinkle Twinkle Southern Cross* (1943)

The most significant collection of indigenous nursery rhymes published in the 1940s was Harold Charles' *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945). Presumably it reached an appreciative audience for in a short time a more lavishly presented, if abridged, edition appeared entitled *New Nursery Rhymes*.

While some of these rhymes warrant reprinting for today's audience most have neither the pith nor the energy of earlier Australian attempts in the genre:

### Greedy Me!

A carrot, a pumpkin, an onion, a pea,  
All grow in my garden for somebody's tea.  
Now who do you think that someone can be;  
A lady; a gentleman? No; just me!

Harold Charles, *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945)

### Greedy Guy

Greedy, Greedy, Greedy Guy,  
Gobbled Granny's Gooseberry Pie.  
Sour and tart was Granny's pie  
Sorry and sad was Greedy Guy.

Harold Charles, *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945)

### Chimney Pots

Chimney pots, chimney pots, all in a row.  
Chimney pots, chimney pots, some all aglow.  
Some black as jet, some white as snow.  
Chimney pots, chimney pots, all in a row.

Harold Charles, *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945)

### Dobbin Goes

Jiggity, jiggity, jiggity, jog,  
Dobbin goes jiggity jog.  
Dobbin goes cloppity, cloppity, clop  
Over the cobbles in front of the shop.  
Jiggity, jiggity, jiggity, jog,  
Cloppity, cloppity, clop.

Harold Charles, *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945)

### Pussy, Wash Your Face

Pussy, wash your face,  
Pussy, wash it, dear.  
Lick your paw  
And rub your paw  
Round behind your ear.  
Then a mousey you may chase,  
If a mouse is near.

Harold Charles, *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945)

### To Market We Canter

To market we canter, we canter away,  
On Robin, and Blossom the old dappled grey;  
Their shoes sing a song as we canter along,  
As we canter along, hear their shoes sing this song:  
Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
Their shoes seem to say.  
Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
Three ha'pence for tuppence,  
To market we canter,  
So, hip-hip-hooray!

Harold Charles, *Australian Nursery Rhymes* (1945)

### Topsy Turvey

Topsy Turvey upside down,  
Rode home on his horse to Jumbletown.  
He didn't reach there but went round and around,  
With his feet in the air and his head near the ground.  
Topsy Turvey upside down,  
Wasn't he simple,  
The foolish clown.

Harold Charles, *New Nursery Rhymes* (c.1946)

In the immediate post-war years, there continued to be a relative indifference to indigenous children's verse in general and one has to search particularly hard to find any attempts at nursery rhymes:

Sing a song of sixpence,  
Sing a song of sense,  
Half a dozen kookaburras,  
Sitting on a fence.

What are they all there for,  
Bring some meat and see.  
Twenty more come flying down,  
On a jolly spree.

Meat for which he works not,  
For each laughing jack,  
Treat them very kindly now,  
And they'll all come back.

Sing a song of sixpence,  
It's worth sixpence to see,  
Six and twenty jolly jacks,  
Waiting for their tea.

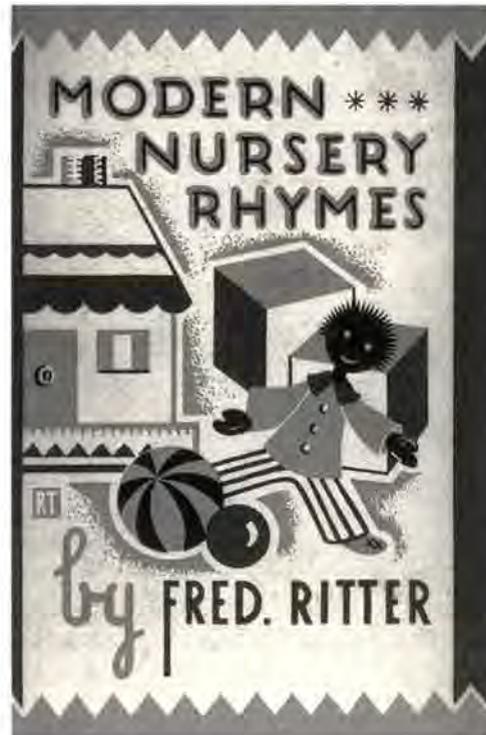
Matt J. Fox, *Uncle Matt's Modern Nursery Rhymes for Clever Children* (1947)

Naughty Freddy Freckleface  
Wouldn't put his hat on,  
Always stood upon the chairs,  
When they should be sat on.

Fred Ritter, *Modern Nursery Rhymes* (1949)

Perhaps the most significant volume of Australian children's verse published in the 1950s was Mary Gilmore's *Verse for Children* (1955). Even though this was from the pen of so venerated a figure as Gilmore the work only achieved

publication in a small edition and that in which the type was hand-set! Some of these verses, as the dustwrapper proclaimed, 'are nursery rhymes, with a lilting cadence that a child, once hearing, will never forget':



### Run Little Bettykin

Run, little Bettykin,  
Run, run, run!  
Silver stars a penny,  
And thrippence for the sun!  
But better than the sun  
Is the nice new moon;  
If Betty eats her porridge  
She shall have it for a spoon.

Mary Gilmore, *Verse for Children* (1955)

### One Snail, Two Snails

One snail and two snails  
Had a little talk:  
One snail and two snails  
Went a little walk.  
They came to a garden  
And climbed up a tree,  
Where a jolly old kookaburra  
Gobbled up the three.

Mary Gilmore, *Verse for Children* (1955)

### Bones in a Pot

Little Billy Button  
Said he wanted mutton;  
Miss Betty Bligh  
Said she wanted pie;

But young Johnny Jones  
Said he wanted Bones—  
Bones in a pot,  
All hot!

Mary Gilmore, *Verse for Children* (1955)

Mary Gilmore had first displayed an interest in Australian children's folklore as far back as 1914 when she edited the 'Women's Page' of *The Australian Worker* and tried to encourage readers to send in children's play rhymes. Significantly, one of the most memorable short poems in her 1955 volume is 'Pulling the Sheets' which reads like a children's play rhyme itself. One can easily imagine a nursery audience clapping in time and accompanying this poem with other appropriate hand actions:

*Draw the sheet, draw the sheet,*  
Draw the sheet and over;  
We made the cloth of linen thread,  
And bleached it in the clover.

*Draw the sheet, turn the sheet,*  
Fold the edges under;  
We saw the bud upon the flax,  
And watched it in a wonder.

We saw the blue, the bonny blue,  
And then the blue was over;  
We hulled the flax that made the sheet,  
And bleached it in the clover!

Mary Gilmore, *Verse for Children* (1955)



The use of the nursery rhyme format for satiric effect in adult verse (which had been used to such good effect in the 1920s

by George Gibson and C.J. Dennis) was reactivated in the 1950s by Lex Banning. A number of his most striking poems in *Apocalypse in Springtime* (1956) were based on traditional nursery rhymes and include a terse and rather chilling variation on 'There Was a Crooked Man':



Banning's use of the nursery rhyme format in his adult verse was clearly acknowledged when his collected poems were published: *There Was a Crooked Man*. One of this book's most memorable pieces was 'Nursery Rhyme for an Astronaut':

Also in the 1950s J.D.G. Medley wrote a clever adult version of 'Sing a Song of Sixpence' in his *Australian Alphabet* (1953):

1933  
 Sing a song of Melbourne!  
 Money by the sack!  
 Fifteen hundred squatters  
 Squatting in Toorak.  
 Heaven all about them:  
 Hear the angels sing

'Strictly no admittance here;  
 God Save the King!'

1953  
 Sing a dirge for Melbourne,  
 All gone to the pack!  
 Squatters can no longer  
 Lord it in Toorak.  
 Lo! where castles glittered  
 Flatlets with con. mod.  
 That's where squatters live now,  
 Chanting 'Ichabod!'

J.D.G. Medley, *Australian Alphabet* (1953)

By the 1960s there was a great upsurge in the quantity of Australian verse being published yet even so there were few capable practitioners lured by the charms of children's verse let alone nursery verse. One of the few poetic voices to respond was Irene Gough in *One Sunday Morning Early* (1963). This volume was a breakthrough both in terms of the quality of its children's verse and for its presentation. Ure Smith, better renowned for their production of fine art books, were the publishers and there was nothing ephemeral or apologetic in its presentation.

One has only to compare it to Mary Gilmore's volume of children's verse published nearly a decade earlier to appreciate this advance in presentation. One of the most memorable poems in Gough's volume is a rhyming game, 'My White Duck', which begs for group recitation in which the whole nursery could share:

Other poems in this book are also appropriate nursery items combining as they do brevity of form with a sure ear for rhythm and a sparse vocabulary untrammelled by fulsome descriptions or sentiment:

One of the characteristics of Australian children's verse since the mid 1970s has been an increasing element of playfulness, of boisterous wordplay. Among the most memorable examples are some which take their cue from Dennis' use of Australian place names:

The most significant promotion of Australian nursery rhymes in the 1960s was provided by Joyce Saxby in her carefully considered anthology, *One Hundred Poems Chosen for Children* (1967). This anthology of Australian poems included an entire section entitled 'Nursery rhymes and nonsense' which featured ten nursery rhymes, opening with D.H. Souter's 'The Man from Menindee' (*sic*). Due to the typographical layout, the reader could be misled into assuming that all ten nursery rhymes were by Souter! However, only the first is his and it is the version found in *Bush Babs*. The remaining nine nursery rhymes are taken (without acknowledgement) from the 'Red Page' of the *Bulletin* for 18 October 1917 and are all by different poets, even though this also is not acknowledged.

There has also been an observable desire to amuse the young reader at any cost and while comic verse holds a valid place this desire has exposed us to much that is otherwise quite trivial and pedestrian. Out of this often impetuous verse the work of someone like Barbara Giles refreshes with its unobtrusive craft and with no obvious desire to force Australian references upon the reader. Instead she takes

inspiration from the traditional nursery rhyme format to create some of the most effective contributions on the contemporary scene:

Gentle, more domestic, examples of nursery verse by Michael Dugan and Lydia Pender avoid the high powered energy levels generated by much of our recent children's verse:

Today a new regard for and an encouragement of children's folklore in Australia have fostered both research and publishing enterprise. The (Melbourne) Institute of Early Childhood Development, and June Factor in particular, have turned the academic recording of children's playground rhymes into a more popular pursuit. In the process, such folklorists have put Australians back in touch with a nationally evocative area of nostalgia, with cultural continuity and, perhaps most importantly, with an evolving sub-culture. In short, they have returned many of us to our own childhoods and showed that whatever our diverse environmental conditions may have been, this unsophisticated outpouring of playground rhyme is one shared link between generations. And these spontaneous and irreverent outbursts have fuelled the publication of at least seven popular anthologies in the 1980s.<sup>60</sup>

I would claim that this elevation of what was once a largely invisible sub-culture into mainstream culture has had a discernible effect on adult poets: the newly accessible rhymes of children have clearly influenced a number of our adult poets in their choice of verse forms, subjects and approaches.

The zeal with which children parody traditional nursery rhymes and mock or overthrow their elder's assumptions of childhood innocence has been recognised and appropriated by such contemporary Australian poets writing for children as Max Fatchen and Bill Scott. It will be interesting to see if the direction of this inspiration will be reversed, if some of these adult attempts which utilise the nursery rhyme format will enter Australian family folklore and thereafter be themselves subjected to change by their young audience. This energising process guarantees that our children's folklore remains a vital component of contemporary culture rather than an ossified relic relating only to past generations.

### Four and Twenty Kookaburras

Four and twenty kookaburras  
Sitting on a bough;  
Laughing till the heavens rattle:  
One unholy row.

Sing a song of bushland,  
Sing it loud and strong,  
Four and twenty kookaburras  
Laughing all day long.

When the song is over  
And the laughter starts to die,  
Four and twenty kookaburras  
Have another try!

Robert Holden (1991)

### Sleepy Time Rhyme

First to bed  
—A sleepy head.

Second to go  
—Quiet and slow.

Third to sleep  
—Sweet dreams, sweet.

Fourth in a cot,  
—Now that's the lot!

Robert Holden (1991)

### Barber, Barber

Barber, barber, cut it short  
Cut it with a knife and fork,  
Tie it high, and tie it low,  
Tie it with a fancy bow.  
Curl it, twirl it,  
Twist it tightly.  
Braid a rope  
And jump it sprightly!

Robert Holden (1991)

### Baby Dumpling

A bumpkin, a dumbkin  
A little lazy lumpkin,  
Baby sits in the chair.  
A spriteling, a sproutling,  
A roly poly stout thing,  
What should Baby care?

Robert Holden (1991)

The chronological meanderings of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Southern Cross* have walked many a crooked mile and unearthed much made-to-order folklore of which some, at least, have a claim to nursery fame. In the process they have offset the idea that interest in and demand for Australian children's folklore was only a relatively recent phenomenon. There is instead historical and imaginative continuity between Molesworth Jeffrey in mid-nineteenth-century Tasmania rewriting traditional nursery rhymes for his deprived children and today's poets reinvigorating the nursery rhyme format for a contemporary Australian audience.

*Twinkle, Twinkle, Southern Cross* offers a new constellation of nursery rhyme characters and nursery rhyme lore. As claimed at the beginning of this survey:

to that vast menagerie that includes blind mice, an  
amorous frog, lost sheep and a cat with a fiddle can  
[now] be added Australian denizens such as leaping  
kangaroos, irrepressible laughing kookaburras, fearsome  
bunyips and clever rabbits who outsmart the dingo!

## Notes

- 1 *Folklife: Our Living Heritage. Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia* (1987), p. 92.
- 2 Robert Holden, 'Lost, stolen or strayed: from the Australian babes in the woods to Azaria Chamberlain', *Voices*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1991), pp. 58–70.
- 3 Terry and Frances O'Neill, comps, *Australian Children's Books to 1980: a Select Bibliography of the Collection Held in the National Library of Australia* (1989).
- 4 Iona and Peter Opie, eds, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951), p. 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- 6 Richard Henry Horne, 'A witch in the nursery', *Household Words* (20 September 1851), pp. 601–9.
- 7 Walter de la Mare, 'Introduction', *Nursery Rhymes for Certain Times* (1946), p. 5.
- 8 Ian Turner, *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* (1969).
- 9 See the *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, vol. 1, no. 1 (September 1981) onwards, and June Factor, comp., *Captain Cook Chased a Cbook: Children's Folklore in Australia* (1988).
- 10 Ian Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
- 11 'Wanted: Australian nursery rimes', *Bulletin* (30 August 1917), 'Red Page'.
- 12 Molesworth Jeffrey, [*Hashshelousho Melochim*] or, *The Three Kings or, Various Exercises and Fragments in Metre by Diverse Authors* (1864), p. 25.
- 13 See Thomas Henry Braim, *A History of New South Wales, from its Settlement to the Close of the Year 1844* (1846), vol. II, p. 314.
- 14 Contrary to the statement in *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (1984), the Howitts sailed for Australia on the *Kent* on 15 June 1852.
- 15 Quoted in Marcie Muir, *A History of Australian Childrens Book Illustration* (1982), p. 35.
- 16 Victor Daley, 'Girls' song-games', *Bulletin* (26 February 1898), 'Red Page'.
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- with music by Georgette Peterson and illustrations by Ida Rentoul Outhwaite.
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- 20 Marcie Muir, *A History of Australian Childrens Book Illustration* (1982), p. 40.
- 21 E.R., 'Australian nursery rhymes', *Bulletin* (5 November 1908), 'Red Page'. 'E.R.' was actually Elsie Macrae and her cousin Ruth Bedford. Their identity is revealed in Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 3269, Box 134a.
- 22 'Australian as spoken', *Bulletin* (8 November 1917), 'Red Page'.
- 23 G. Herbert Gibson, *Ironbark Splinters from the Australian Bush* (1912), p. 121.
- 24 Jimmie Pannikin [Donald E. Fraser], *Thoughts for Teachers* (1914).
- 25 Jimmie Pannikin, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- 26 Jimmie Pannikin, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
- 27 See *The Australian Worker* from 22 October to 3 December 1914.
- 28 'Wanted: Australian nursery rimes' *Bulletin* (30 August 1917), 'Red Page'.
- 29 The only copy I have located of this fragile item is in the Opie collection and appears as item 651 in their *Three Centuries of Nursery Rhymes and Poetry for Children* (1973, 2nd edn, 1977). Here it is described as being a 'Mirror Reprint', price threepence.
- 30 *Australian Nursery Rimes* (1917), back cover.
- 31 'Australian nursery rimes', *Bulletin* (18 October 1917), 'Red Page'.
- 32 Edward S. Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks* (1911), p. 55.
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- 34 'Mothercraft and the Empire', *Lone Hand* (14 February 1920), p. 37.
- 35 See 'First Australian Baby Week', *Lone Hand* (2 March 1920), p. 13.
- 36 Gwenda Davey, 'Nursery rhymes and the National Library', *Australian Children's Folklore Newsletter*, no. 16 (July 1989), p. 5.
- 37 Letter in Museum of Australian Childhood, Sydney archives, 17 December 1989.
- 38 I am grateful to Gwenda Davey for drawing my attention to this reference: O'Connor Collection of Australian Folklore, National Library of Australia, tape no. TRC 2539/089, side 1.
- 39 W.O. Richards, Director, Weston Company Ltd, to W.H. Ifould, Principal Librarian, Public Library, Sydney, 5 December 1918. Weston Company Baby Booklet Series, Mitchell Library, A821/W.
- 40 See John Sands' 'Sunny South Series' of four shape books issued in 1931.
- 41 Six 'Australian nursery rhymes' by E.R., *Bulletin* (5 November 1908), 'Red Page'.
- 42 Ruth Bedford to George Robertson, 29 July 1920, Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 314/11.

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- 43 George Robertson to Ruth Bedford, 9 August 1920, Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 314/11.
- 44 See inside front cover of Charles Barrett's *Bushland Babies* (1924).
- 45 C.J. Dennis to George Robertson, 31 August 1920, Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 314/26.
- 46 George Robertson to C.J. Dennis, 23 August 1920, Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 314/26.
- 47 C.J. Dennis to George Robertson, 31 August 1920, Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 314/26.
- 48 C.J. Dennis to James Tyrrell, 2 June 1915. Quoted in Ian McLaren's *C.J. Dennis: a Comprehensive Bibliography Based on the Collection of the Compiler* (1979), p. 46.
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- 50 C.J. Dennis to George Robertson, 20 July 1921, Angus & Robertson Papers, Mitchell Library, Mss 314/26.
- 51 See *Gadfly* (26 June 1907 and 3 July 1907).
- 52 See also 'Communursery rhymes', reprinted in C.J. Dennis, *Random Verse* (1952), pp. 21–2.
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- 56 *Kookaburra* arranged by Carolee Cartright (USA: Boosey & Hawkes, 1986).
- 57 See the works by Connie Christie, Kay Druce, Jean Elder, Peg Maltby and Rufus Morris in the 'Select List of Sources Consulted'.
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- 59 Iona and Peter Opie, comps, *Three Centuries of Nursery Rhymes and Poetry for Children* (2nd edn, 1977) p. 47.
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## Key to Illustrations

- Frontispiece p. vi 'The Southern Cross' illustration by Rex Code from E.T. Luke, *Australian Nature Studies and Nursery Rhymes* (1921).
- page 3 'And the 'Roo Jumped over the Moon' illustration by D.H. Souter from his *Bush Babs* (1933).
- page 4 'Sun ray' from C.J. DeGaris, ed., *'Sun-Raysed' Children's Fairy Story Book* (1919).
- page 6 Cover illustration by Louisa Anne Meredith from her *Waratah Rhymes for Young Australia* (1891).
- page 7 'Miss Muffett' and the 'trap-door spider' illustrations by Emma Minnie Boyd from Louisa Anne Meredith, *Waratah Rhymes for Young Australia* (1891).
- page 8 Isaac Nathan, *Hey-Diddle-Diddle!* (c.1860).
- pages 10 & 11 Title page, 'emu' and 'native pheasant' from William Anderson Cawthorne, *Who Killed Cockatoo?* (1870).
- pages 12 & 13 Cover, 'A' and 'J, K' illustrations from *The Australian ABC Book* (c.1917).
- page 14 Cover illustration from *The Young Australian's Alphabet* (c.1871).
- pages 17 & 18 'Hey Diddle Diddle', 'There Was an Old Man', 'Mary Had' and 'My Pet' illustrations by D.H Souter from Ethel Turner, *Gum Leaves* (1900).
- pages 19 & 20 Cover and 'kookooburra' illustrations by Ida Rentoul Outhwaite from Georgette Peterson and Annie R. Rentoul, *Bush Songs of Australia for Young and Old* (1910).
- pages 21 & 22 Cover and 'M' illustrations by Norman Carter from Hugh McCrae, *The Australian Alphabet* (1905).
- page 28 Postcard illustrations by Muriel G. Nicholls (c.1906).
- pages 50, 51 & 52 'Cuppacumalonga', 'The Traveller' and 'The Funny Hatter' illustrations by C.J. Dennis from his *A Book for Kids* (1921).
- page 54 Postcards illustrated by Rodney Alsop issued by the Willsmere Certified Milk Company, Melbourne (c.1905).
- page 55 Cover illustration by C.J. Dennis from his *A Book for Kids* (1921).
- page 60 'The Wallaby and the Bull-ant' from The Perfesser & Alter Ego, *Tails and Tarradiddles* (1925).

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- pages 63 & 64 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Cow-bells' and 'The Wallaby Rat' illustrations by Kathleen Ussher from Jane de Burgh, *Gum-Trees* (1925).
- page 65 'I Want to Be Like Captain Cook' illustration by D.H. Souter from *Young Australia*, no. 56 (20 June 1928).
- page 68 'Digger, Our Cat' illustration by D.H. Souter from *Young Australia*, no. 59 (20 September 1928).
- page 70 'Believe it or Believe it not...' illustration by D.H. Souter from his *Bush Babs* (1933).
- page 71 'T' from *An Alphabet, Being a Book of Designs & Rhymes* (1932).
- page 78 Cover illustration by Roma Thompson from Fred Ritter, *Modern Nursery Rhymes* (1949).
- page 82 'Northern Train' illustration by Noella Young from Irene Gough, *One Sunday Morning Early* (1963); 'Dilemma' illustration by Peter Viska from Michael Dugan, *Flocks' Socks and Other Shocks* (1987).
- page 83 'New Rhymes' illustration by Roland Harvey from Michael Dugan, comp., *More Stuff & Nonsense* (1980).
- page 84 'Ruinous Rhymes' illustration by Michael Atchinson from Max Fatchen, *Wry Rhymes for Troublesome Times* (1983).
- page 85 'Well-wishers' illustration by Craig Smith from Ann Weld, comp., *Fractured Fairytales & Ruptured Rhymes* (1990).

*Note:* Colour illustrations are captioned where they appear.

**TWINKLE, TWINKLE, SOUTHERN CROSS** combines scholarship and entertainment as it wanders many a crooked mile through the made-to-order folklore of Australia's own nursery rhymes. In the process it offers a new constellation of nursery characters to add to the more traditional figures.

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Examples from as early as 1854 and extending to the present day are examined in a wide-ranging context of Australian literary and publishing history, the growth of nationalism and the welfare and education of young Australians.

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