

## Research Note

# “DISTINCT CHARACTERS OF THEIR OWN”:

## Mermaids in late 19th-mid 20th Century Australian children’s fiction

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**ABSTRACT:** While mermaids have been found all around the world, their literary and cultural representations are traditionally associated with Europe.<sup>1</sup> Recently attention has been paid to the particular resonance of mer-folk narratives in specifically Australian contexts. Hayward, Floyd, Snell, Organ and Callaway have drawn attention to examples of mer-worlds that directly intersect with and comment on Australian environments. Beginning in the late 19th Century, predominantly women writers relocate mermen and mermaids to explore relationships between land and sea, city and bush that have local resonance for young readers. These stories are often accompanied by rich illustrations designed to appeal to young imaginations. This note comments on three writers whose work relates mer-cultures to Australia: J.M Whitfield, Pixie O’Harris and Harriet Stephens, along with their illustrators, G.W Lambert, Ida Rentoul Outhwaite and O’Harris herself.

**KEYWORDS:** Australian mermaids, J M Whitfield, G W Lambert, Harriet Stephens, Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, Pixie O’Harris

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J[esse] M[ary] Whitfield (1862-1964) and G[eorge] W[ashington]<sup>2</sup> Lambert (1873-1930)

*The dwellers in Australian Fairy Land, although akin to those of other climes, have a distinct character of their own.* (Organ: 2015)

Currently May Gibbs’ fictional creatures Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie - the Gumnut babies, and the frightening Banksia men (modelled on the leaves and seed-heads of the *Banksia serrata* shrub) (1918) are probably the best-known examples of writing for children that draws on specifically Australian environments. However, even before Gibbs’ work, other writers were creating imaginative landscapes for characters that sprang from the Australian bush and coastline. One such figure, little known today, is J.M Whitfield, perhaps best known for her short story for children ‘The Spirit of the Bush Fire’ (1898), which in graphic terms tells the tale of the mischievous sprite who seizes on a spark from a man’s pipe to set fire to the bush, endangering the native animals and trees, and eventually human beings too. It is a scary tale, vividly capturing the sense of anxiety experienced across Australia

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<sup>1</sup> See the charmingly illustrated *The Mermaid Atlas: Merfolk of the World* (2020).

<sup>2</sup> In some publications Lambert is referred to as C.W but this seems to be an error.

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about the often-present danger of fire. Beaten by a downpour of rain, the Spirit retreats muttering "Ah, next time, next time" (1898: 9).

Whitfield has been described as "one of the first children's authors to introduce fairies, giants, witches, dragons and mermaids into Australian children's literature" (McVitty: 1989: 240), and the rest of the collection of tales in *The Spirit of the Bush Fire Series Part I* moves away from the Australian bush to the Australian seaside, most of it focussing on the adventures of "Microscopic Tim," in which he encounters a Sea Wizard, an octopus and a great sea serpent. There are two linked stories that feature mermaids and mermen: 'The Beaching of the Collaroy', and 'The Mermaid's Ballroom'. In the first, the steamer *The Collaroy* is deliberately beached to provide a particularly vain mermaid, named Sunnyhair, with a ballroom. Starting with the true story of a stranded ship (Unattributed, 1881), Whitfield describes a world of pleasure-seeking mer-creatures, with individual characteristics where the rather selfish whims of Sunnyhair are mitigated by her more responsible sisters Poetina and Good-diver, aided and abetted by porpoises and mermen, in their attempts to save the human beings on board *The Collaroy*. Thanks to their efforts, a channel is made in the water so that the ship runs aground on the sand rather than being wrecked on the rocks. 'The Mermaid's Ballroom' tells how Sunnyhair attempts to thwart all efforts to re-float the ship, until engineers are brought in to remove the steamer from the beach. The apparent contradiction of a (fish-tailed) mermaid desiring a "ballroom" above the waves to dance in are resolved by G.W. Lambert (an artist best known for his early 20th Century portraiture) illustrating the story with an image that represents Sunnyhair - and other mermaids at the rear of the image - as able to stand upon their tails in a manner that suggests easy movement (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Whitfield merges the traditional attributes of mermaids "playing in the surf... dancing on the sand, and sitting on the rocks combing their beautiful hair—all gold and glittering, as if someone had dashed bottled sunshine over it", with a specific Australian location: "[s]ome few years ago there were hundreds of [mermaids] all along the coast between Newcastle and Sydney" (1898: 10). Sunnyhair herself is also an amalgam of two different kinds of water spirits: the beautiful, guileless mermaid, and the destructive and alluring siren. Interwoven into a fairy story of mermaids and talking porpoises are images of changing technologies, with the ships that threaten the quiet beach havens of the mermaids. In turn, the presence of the mermaids themselves unsettles the existing porpoise inhabitants. When *The Collaroy* is re-floated, the mermaids are "so disgusted that they turned in a body and fled far away seaward and vowed they would never come anywhere near Manly again", much to the porpoises' relief: "[w]e were happier before they came, and it can't hurt anyone now if I say I am glad they are gone" (ibid). It would be simplistic to suggest that in the displacement of porpoises and mermaids from their natural environments we can read any direct or straightforward allusion to the "ruthless dispersal of the indigenous people" (Callaway: 2013: 18) from around Australia by white colonists, but it would be equally disingenuous not to hear the resonances. These children's stories negotiate real-world issues in a specifically Australian context (ibid).

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<sup>3</sup> The artist also avoids sexualising Sunnyhair, whose upper torso is unclad, by leaving her chest unmarked by breasts or nipples.



Figure 1: G.W. Lambert's Illustration of Sunnyhair and fellow mermaids from 'The Beaching of the Collaroy' (Whitfield, 1898: 25)

Harriet Stephens (1906-1912) and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite (1888-1930)

Very little is known about Harriet Stephens, and, unlike Whitfield, she does not appear in McVitty's listings of Australian children's book writers (1989), although Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, who illustrated some of her work, is included), and her stories "for the children" were published in popular newspapers of the time (Hayward: 2020). Stephens' 'The Queen of the Mermaids' (1909), like Whitfield's 'The Beaching of the Collaroy', also has the specific setting of Manly in Sydney, NSW.<sup>4</sup> The story begins with the complaints of the Queen of the mermaids about the crowds impinging on what was once the mermaids' playground:

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<sup>4</sup> It is notable that both Whitfield and Stephens select Manly for their seaside settings. Hayward (2020) provides some suggestions for the appearance of Manly in these stories. Also see Hayward, Middleweek and Fleury (2021) for an analysis of the emergence of its beach-side tourism.

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*'It's too bad,' she cried in a choked voice. 'First, the big Earth People in the morning, making enough noise to send the fish into convulsions, then the children all day, shouting and screaming, and now both together. It must be stopped somehow.'* (ibid: 884)

So, the Sea King makes great efforts to repel the Earth visitors from the beach to appease his truculent daughter. Holes are dug, the Tide flings sand over the top of them to trap unsuspecting swimmers, and Undercurrents trick the unwary. But still the Earth people come up with solutions such as lifelines and "policemen ordered on guard", and after three months the King gives up:

*And so the Queen of the Mermaids was forced to seek another beach, for all her plans were useless, and the Earth people never knew what plots had been arranged against them by the Sea King and his daughter in the depths of the ocean.* (ibid)

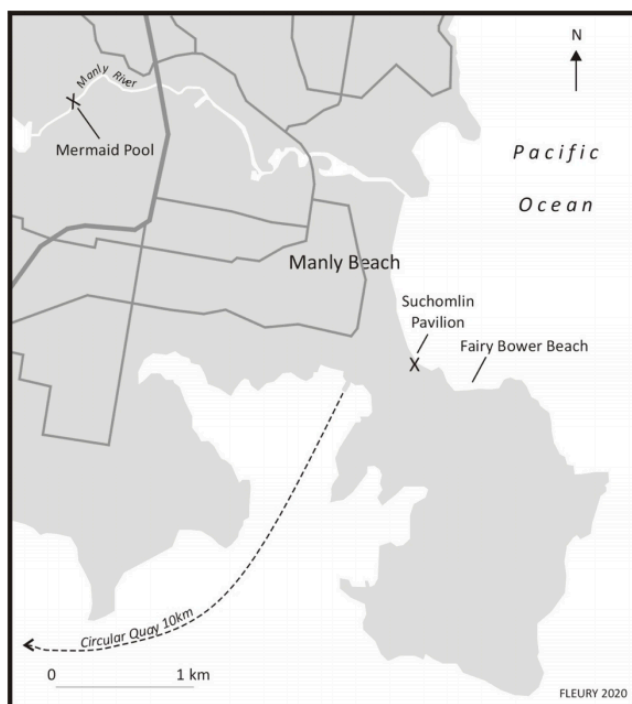


Figure 2 – Manly and its position at the north-east corner of Sydney Harbour (the setting for some of Whitfield's and Stephens' mermaid themed writings) and related local fairy and mermaid named locations – map courtesy of Christian Fleury.

Another Stephens' story, 'The Sunset Shells' (1911b), is a rather more straightforward moral tale about a jealous mermaid, Glidewella, who tries to disrupt the wedding of Prince Wavelet to Princess Foam by forcing a seahorse to hide Princess Foam's precious ritual shells, until the seahorse, (with the help of his fish friends Sand-Whiting, Flathead and Mullet), return the shells so that the wedding can take place. A third story 'The Guardian of the Pearl Sprite' (1911a) is a variation on the 'ugly duckling that turns into a swan' story

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where the oyster, who is treated as an ugly, lazy sea-creature for sitting on a rock all day, is finally recognised and celebrated as the maker of the beautiful pearl cherished by the Fairy Queen. Stephens' stories, melding traditional fairy story elements with Australian content are part of a move to "affix the elves and fairies [and mermaids] of Europe onto the Australian landscape" (Floyd, 2010), bringing familiar morality tales about the triumph of inner goodness over superficial beauty into Australian contexts.

The three stories were illustrated by Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, who became one of the most popular illustrators of children's literature in the period with a distinct, finely detailed style of drawing (McVitty, 1989: 162-63). Figure 2, an illustration from 'The Sunset Shells,' is notable for representing a fish-tailed mer-king, replete with trident, whereas her bookplate image "Little Mermaid and Sea Babies" represents a mermaid, a fully human baby and a human child.

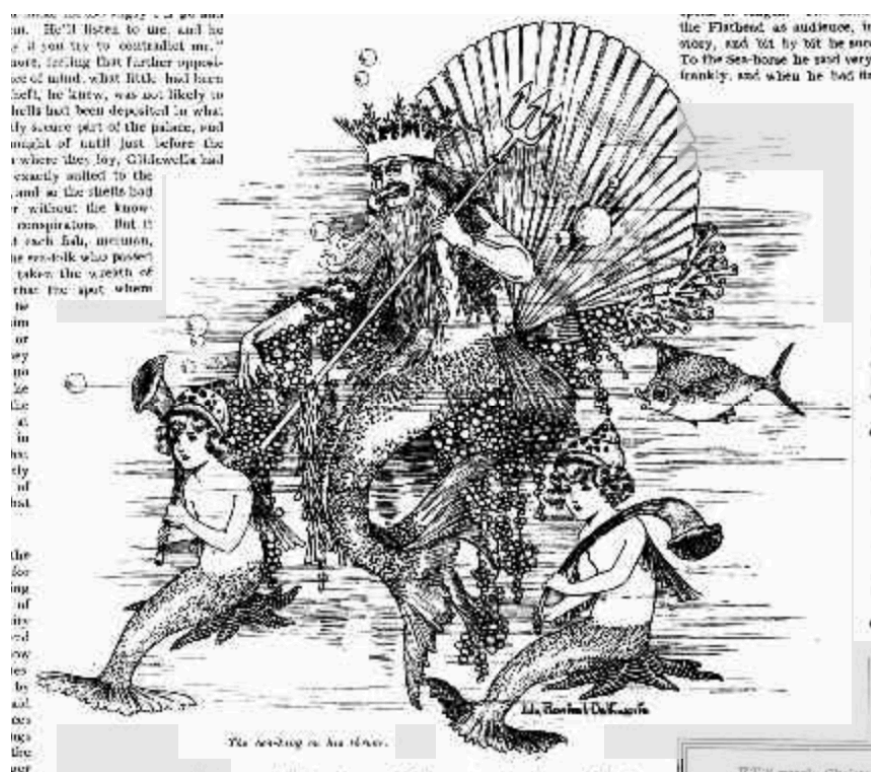


Figure 3 – Ida Rentoul-Outhwaite, illustration from Stephens (191b: 43)



Figure 4 – Ida Rentoul Outhwaite “Little Mermaid and Sea Babies’ (bookplate, c1920)

#### Pixie O'Harris (Rhona Olive Harris - 1903-1991)

Along with fellow writer-illustrator Connie Christie, whose mermaid themed work is discussed by Hayward (2019: 176-177), Pixie O'Harris is also a significant contributor to children's mermaid fiction. Rather better known than Whitfield or Stephens, O'Harris both wrote stories and illustrated them, and has recently (2020) been the subject of an exhibition on the mid-north coast of the Australian state of New South Wales, which displayed some of her pictures that brightened the corridors of children's hospitals (Siossan, 2020). O'Harris's mermaids, like Whitfield's, are part of a more general fairy world, but her tales of goose-girls and princesses also have a distinctly Australian flavour, deploying specific Australian plant names, such as Fairy Flannel-Flower, Elf Banksia and Fairy Wattle. 'Lantana and the Mermaid' (1948) tells the story of a lonely little girl sent to convalesce with her aunt who lives by the seaside. At the beach Lantana meets a mermaid Princess Coraleen, who admires her name:



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*"What a pretty name."*

*"It's the name of a flower that grows wild in the bush. People don't like it as a rule, but my mother loves it."* (121)<sup>5</sup>

Coraleen gives Lantana a piece of seaweed that transforms into a bathing costume, and the two girls slip under the sea, where Coraleen shows Lantana all the magic shell gardens of her palace and tells her stories of the things she has found, including one special doll that belonged once upon a time to a "land Princess" (O'Harris, 1948: 124). When a storm blows up Coraleen summons a sea horse to take Lantana back to land and safety.

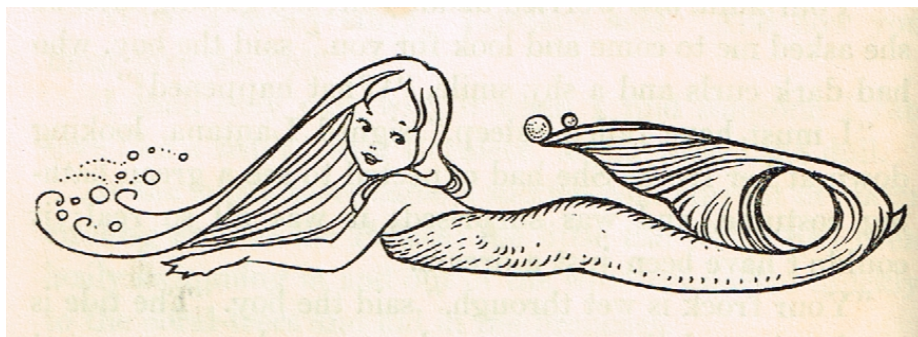


Figure 4 - Illustration at the end of 'Lantana and the Mermaid' (O'Harris, 1948: 128).

Pixie O'Harris wrote in strikingly idealistic terms that "the fairy tale can teach a child about love, caring, sacrifice, beauty, courage, endurance, adventure, unselfishness, belief (which is important) that purity can prevail, that after all good does triumph in the end" (McVitty: 1989: 156), and McVitty suggests that the high tide of fairy tales in the early 20th Century subsided in favour of "greater realism and stories depicting everyday life rather than the fanciful" *ibid*: 155) after the Second World War. While fairy tales became popular internationally through the translation and publication of work by Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm (Hayward: 2020), the Australian fairy stories of mermaids outlined above can be seen as part of the development of a "national identity nurturing a connection with the native environment" (Snell, 2017: online). The landscapes represented in these stories have specifically Australian markers in terms of plants, fish, birds and sometimes named places. Furthermore, the stories can also be perceived to include a "critique of colonialism's negative impact upon the landscape" (*ibid*), in which mer-cultures play diverse and ambiguous roles. Sometimes mermaids are associated with the 'natural' world of the sea and water-creatures, and sometimes mermaids themselves are part of a human-like colonisation that upsets the equilibrium of that natural environment. Mermaids — always themselves liminal beings, part fish, part human — are fruitfully deployed to explore the shifting boundaries between land and sea, human and non-human, indigenous and non-indigenous in coastal Australia.

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<sup>5</sup> While Lantana is not a native plant of Australia but of Central and South America, it has become a very familiar weedy pest in many areas of the east coast of NSW to the extent that in the film *Lantana* (2001, Ray Lawrence) it takes on symbolic characteristics.

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