

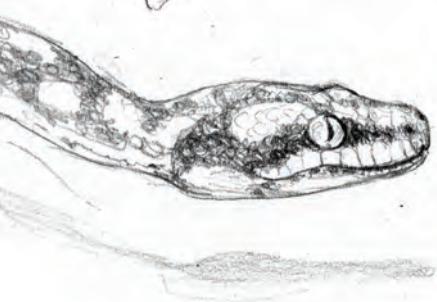
## STEPHANIE HOLM

# Curious creatures and bushland beasts: inspiration from the children's book collection

How did the early European settlers talk to their children about Australia's unique and unfamiliar landscape? What types of stories and images did they create to characterise and make sense of its strange fauna and flora? As a natural history illustrator, writer and avid reader I wanted to explore how the Australian environment, filled with new and unfamiliar species, was characterised in text and illustrations in children's books in the 19th century and into the 20th century. 'From curious creatures to bushland beasts: a graphic novel exploring representations of Australian fauna and flora in early Australian children's book publishing' was the title I proposed for my Children's Literature Fellowship, undertaken at State Library Victoria in 2016–17. My aim was to view a selection of Australian children's books, to discover how Australian fauna and flora were portrayed in both text and illustrations, and then to develop a creative response in the form of a graphic novel. My research method was to be autoethnographic: I would note and sketch my responses to the works I viewed.

I arrived at the Library armed with a long list of titles I wanted to see from the Children's Literature Collection. What I found was a fascinating and diverse representation of the Australian landscape, with a noticeable shift

Stephanie Holm, sketches of kookaburra and snake for 'Burra and the snake', pencil on paper, 2017



occurring between the books published in the late 19th century and those in the early 20th century, which reveals a changing relationship with the land itself.

The types of tales I read featuring Australian fauna and flora included moral or educational and instructional tales, tales promoting conservation, fantasy stories and nonsense and made-up verse. In many moral tales and fantasy works fauna and flora characters were anthropomorphised and, sometimes, exoticised.

Many of the earlier stories (pre-1900), particularly colonial adventure stories, feature the Australian landscape as an exotic setting. This is also true of fairy stories. For example, in *Australian Fairy Tales* (1897) by (Frank) Atha Westbury, originally from Yorkshire, England, the land is a foreign imagining; this is revealed in ‘The gold cloud’, the first story in the collection:

To the gaze of our hero it appeared nothing but a mass of weeds and ragged, bare shrubs, under which a whole multitude of kangaroos, emus, wallabies, wild goats, and native bears were gathered in wild confusion.<sup>1</sup>

Australia is rendered as a fascinating though rough country, and the works of Westbury and other fairy story authors, for all their inclusion of Australian flora and fauna, are very much in the vein of European fairy stories. The illustrations, particularly in Westbury’s book – line drawings of humanoid characters in an indistinct landscape – could be of anywhere.

One book that doesn’t follow this trend is *My Childhood in Australia* (1892) by Mrs F Hughes (Alice Hughes), a memoir of the author’s childhood on a country station.<sup>2</sup> This book reveals a close connection with the local landscape. Animals are observed and portrayed realistically through anecdotal scenes. There is a story of a black snake living under the author’s bedroom, which occasionally popped its head up through the floorboards (until it was killed by the family) and a tale about the appearance of so many frogs and spiders after a storm that they had to be chased out of the house.

I was also interested in how the characters in these stories react to native animals. Generally, native fauna is presented as a great curiosity, and in books up to about 1910 animals are either persecuted because they are viewed as threats to settlers and their livelihood (particularly dingos, Tasmanian tigers and snakes) or adopted as pets. Yet authors and illustrators such as Amy Mack and Louisa Meredith aimed to raise the profile of Australian native species and encourage their conservation. *Bushland Stories* (1910) by Amy Mack contains a rich mix of natural history tales told by plant and animal characters and is designed to be informative.<sup>3</sup> In one story a dotterel wants to build a nest,



Illustration by Lionel Lindsay for the story 'The birds' concert', from Amy Mack, *Bushland Stories*, illustrated by Lionel Lindsay, 2nd edn, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1914, p.89



My earliest sketches were very rough, trying to capture an idea. Though I liked this idea, of a young girl reading a story to a cosy group of animals, it did not make the final anthology. Stephanie Holm, *Young girl reading*, pencil on paper, 2017

so it talks to all the other birds to find out how to do it. Other stories in the same book have fantasy elements, like Mother Nature painting tree leaves red, which hurts them and causes them to die, and flower fairies teaching a young boy about Australian native flowers. A number of editions of *Bushland Stories* were illustrated in colour by Lionel Lindsay.<sup>4</sup> Lindsay's illustrations are bright and engaging and filled with detail, capturing the essence of the tales. In contrast, a later, larger edition, illustrated by Joyce Dennys, doesn't seem nearly as captivating.<sup>5</sup> The images, which show Art Nouveau influence, are more decorative than illustrative, and the coloured illustrations are more muted and don't seem to convey the same sense of the Australian landscape as do Lindsay's illustrations.

In Victorian children's author Mary Grant Bruce's *Timothy in Bushland* (1912) the protagonist leaves his bed at night and walks through the scrub surrounding his father's farm.<sup>6</sup> He converses with kangaroos and many other Australian animals before meeting the bunyip, who is the king of Bushland.



Left: Stephanie Holm, digitally edited sketch of bush stone-curlews, pencil on paper with digital editing, 2017

Right: Stephanie Holm, final illustration of bush stone-curlews for 'The house on Dark Point Road', pencil on paper, 2017

The book is illustrated with evocative and intriguing line drawings by J MacFarlane.

A very different style of representation of Australian fauna is found in *Tails and Taradiddles: an Australian book of birds and beasts*, published in 1925 under the pseudonym of the Perfesser and Alter Ego, Esquire.<sup>7</sup> The author, Launcelot Harrison, was a professor of zoology at the University of Sydney and husband of Amy Mack. His writing similarly reflects his knowledge of local natural history; however, the style of his tales is very different. Many take the form of amusing rhyming verses (ostensibly written by Alter Ego) which, with accompanying line illustrations, cleverly relate natural history information, such as the noises made by different species of frogs.

My pleasurable problem became working out how to incorporate this wealth of information in my creative response. As my research progressed it became difficult to see how I could incorporate my response to the diversity



This unsettling sketch became the basis for the flash fiction story 'The flies'. Stephanie Holm, pencil on paper, 2016

of representations in a single story – the graphic novel I had proposed. An illustrated anthology of short stories seemed a more appropriate format, particularly as many of the books I read were anthologies.

The next stage was to flesh out story ideas. Some of my stories started with words, while others began with a sketch. Deciding on an illustration style, too, required a lot of experimentation. Would each story be illustrated in a different style, or would this be confusing? I liked the energy and ideas

present in my early sketches, while the coloured samples I attempted seemed still and lifeless. I settled, eventually, on rendering the final illustrations in graphite, retaining the essence of the early sketches.

A common motif in colonial adventure stories is characters hearing strange noises made by unseen and unidentified animals in the bush. I had heard the eerie call of the ground-dwelling bird the bush-stone curlew and thought it would make a great basis for a story of misunderstanding. I started by sketching the curlews then, scanning the picture and using image-editing software, I digitally placed the curlews in a setting I had sketched separately, distorting the proportions to emphasise the birds. I then wrote the story, in which a group of young boys mistakenly believe an abandoned house is haunted by noisy ghosts. I gave it the title ‘The house on Dark Point Road’.

Kookaburras, also referred to as ‘laughing kookaburras’ and ‘laughing jackasses’, are among the most frequently mentioned animals in the literature I studied. They are commonly paired with snakes, and the kookaburra usually kills the snake. This, along with a true story told to me about a kookaburra that was fed titbits until it was too fat to fly, gave me an idea for a twisted tale.

Flies are mentioned as nuisances in many of the pre-1900 stories I read. I kept thinking about flies settling on my face, which led to a sketch and eventually to the words of a piece of flash fiction (a term given to an extremely brief work of fiction; in my anthology the word count of each piece is fewer than 150 words).

The anthology I created as a result of my fellowship is called “The crawk and other stories”. It’s a series of quirky illustrated stories exploring relationships between people, animals and the Australian landscape from suburbia to somewhere in the outback. There’s a burning mountain, a hidden gorge, a roof-dwelling python, a kookaburra too fat to fly and a rediscovered species. And there are strange noises in the night and field notes from an unremembered expedition. The story types include humour and nonsense, wonder and the exotic, morality and conservation tales, fantasy and exploration. Together, the stories capture the rich and varied representations of native fauna and flora that my research unearthed in early Australian children’s literature.