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## **Little Men and Women Brave the Bush: the Alcott Influence and the Missing Story in Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians***

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**Abstract:** Two works in the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, both produced in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in two countries with similar histories of colonisation, are Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-1869) in America and Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894). Turner's simpler novel is inspired heavily by Alcott's *Little Women* in the use of certain characters, sentimentality, the framing of the narratives, views on gender roles while establishing her protagonists as uniquely Australians. This paper studies how they both engage with the *Bildungsroman* and the colonial heritage of their countries leading to Turner's treatment of the Australian Aboriginals in *Seven Little Australians* and its shaping by the times and nascent literary scene of early settler Australia with particular reference to Tettawonga's Story or the Aboriginal story that was originally a part of the first edition of 1894 and restored to text only with the centenary edition. Turner's novel provides a link between the scene of children's literature in Australia and its Euro-American predecessors while firmly establishing it.

**Keywords:** Ethel Turner, *Seven Little Australians*, silence, Aboriginals, Louisa May Alcott, Tettawonga's Lost Story.

“...[A]nd they say they are very glad to be associated with the Louisa Alcott of Australia. *Such a nice letter it was*” (Poole, ch. 5), so writes 23 year-old Ethel Turner regarding the offer made by Ward Lock in Australia for *Seven Little Australians*, the very first work consciously written for children on Australian soil. This sentiment of Ward Lock, Australia was echoed a year later by Ward Lock's literary advisor, Coulson Kenarhan, in a report on the manuscript:

Here is the Miss Louisa Alcott of Australia — here is one of the strongest, simplest, sweetest, sanest and most beautiful child-stories that I have read for years. (Poole, ch. 5)

Readers and critics alike have subsequently echoed their words regarding Turner's first major literary venture. She does indeed draw heavily from Louisa May Alcott, with *Seven Little Australians* particularly reflecting Alcott's best known work *Little Women*, but it is an inspiration at once shallow and complex, as Turner grapples with not only the nuances of writing for children, but also, and more importantly, the politics of the colonial heritage of Australia.

This paper, divided into two sections, proposes to examine Turner's homage to Alcott, its reflections and detractions, as she bids to be the first children's novelist of her country, like Alcott who was the first of her's – the two women, moreover, belonging to countries with similar histories of colonization. This will bring us to the primary issue under examination, which is, Turner's treatment of aboriginal Australians in *Seven Little Australians* and how it is shaped by the times and the nascent literary scene of a White Australia still in the process of settlement with particular reference to what is now known as Tettawonga's Story – the story the child protagonists hear while at the cattle farm at Yarrahappini – or the Aboriginal story that was originally a part of the first edition of 1894 and restored to the main narrative of the novel only with the centenary edition of 1994.

## I

Like Alcott half a century before her, Turner started making her mark in Australian literary circles early. As a 19 year old, Turner and her elder sister Lillian launched and published their very own literary magazine for women – *Parthenon*. In its three years of successful sailing, to use Turner's own metaphor, it faced a libel suit, received praise from the editors and writers of *The Bulletin* and contributed to the family. Living with a mildly perverted stepfather who exercised an iron fist in ruling over his wife and (step) children, *The Parthenon* was also the only piece of independence secured by Ethel and Lillian. Following its dissolution three years hence, Turner wrote the Children's Page for *Illustrated News* and subsequently other papers, eventually as 'Chief Sunbeamer' of the children's supplementary – Sunbeams – of the *Sydney Sun*, for the next forty years of her life till the death of her daughter Jean finally put a stop to all creative ventures, much like Alcott who was a regular contributor to *The Atlantic Monthly* for nearly all of her life. As her granddaughter and editor of her diaries, Phillipa Poole notes: "Her capacity for inventing new games, puzzles and competitions for children was truly amazing as it was a weekly commitment which spanned a period of about 45 years..." (Poole, ch. 16). The infinite capacity and joy in writing for children and the satisfaction gained by earning through her writing that Poole notes in Turner is most interestingly reflected in Alcott, whose literary career spanned roughly 34 years. Alcott, in 1854, published a delightful compilation of vignettes and sketches previously written for the daughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson calling it *Flower Fables*, and, in a letter to her mother, her "first-born". Even decades later, her first income from it provided her with an unparalleled sense of achievement. "I feel quite proud that the little tales that I wrote for Ellen E. when I was sixteen should now bring money and fame." – she writes in 1855 (Cheney 80). In 1886, she reflects – "A pleasing contrast to the receipts of six months only in 1886, being \$8000 for the sale of books, and no new one; but I was prouder over the \$32 than the \$8000" (Cheney 80).

Similarities between Alcott and Turner run much deeper, similarities that are reflected in their writing. Critics of *Seven Little Australians* have discussed extensively exactly this, but these critiques

are also severely limited in their perspective. Brenda Niall provides a surface comparison of the two novels and how the March became the Woolcot, going onto discuss particularly how Meg and Jo March became Meg and Judy Woolcot.

The originality of *Seven Little Australians* is shown, not in the portrayal of Meg, but in the general pattern of family relationships and in the translation of Jo March into Judy Woolcot. It is in Judy that a contemporary reviewer noted 'a strain of colonial dash and wildness'... Judy, untidy, impatient, clever, unfeminine, has much in common with Jo March: the difference is that Ethel Turner did not find it necessary to teach her submissiveness. (Niall 54)

Meg's transposition here is far more straightforward and Niall covers the most obvious grounds of the roles they play as elder sisters and later as good wives, with the expected flattery by friends and vanity that must be overcome (Niall 54). Turner, in the sequel *The Family at Misrule*, has younger sister Nell overcome similar trials. Sharryn Pearce, while extensively discussing the patriarchal politics behind Judy's death, spares a few parenthetical words to compare Judy and Jo by declaring that unlike Alcott who proved "that biology will always win out over brains" (Pearce 102) by transforming the tomboyish Jo into "wife and mother material." Judy undergoes no such transformation. Like Jo who, as a teenager, wished to enter the nationalist space by participating in the American Civil War – symbolically depicted by the cutting of her hair to give her a boyish look – Judy wishes to partner her brother Pip in every mischief and deed till at the cattle farm in Yarrahappini she is excluded from the manly endeavour of cattle-drafting. In fact, Judy's exclusion from the patriarchal, nationalistic space is the ultimate exclusion. A little later in the novel, when the siblings are on a picnic, Judy dies in a freak accident. In *Little Women*, of course, it is Beth who dies and as both Niall and Pearce have noted, Judy's death is anything but like Beth's, who steadily fades from consumption and has been the eternally frail 'Angel in The House' figure. Judy's death instead, as both assert, is a

sentimental, melodramatic, Victorian death scene and unlike Beth, who has her faith to ease her transition, Judy was “not in the least resigned” (Niall 54) and her death has a sense of wasted potential for the reader, who has in reading the novel grown to be especially fond of the mischievous, quick-witted, sharp, clever, spunky young girl who was the life and soul of her family – “little Miss Judy is such a wild, unquiet subject; she seems to be always in a perfect fever of living, and to possess a capacity for joy and unhappiness quite unknown to slower natures” (Turner 1897, ch. 14). Her freak death is even more tragic when one recalls that Judy was then recuperating from an inflamed lung and becomes the centrepiece around which the family grows and matures. Judy’s death is the turning point for them as Beth’s death was for not just Jo, but also Amy and Laurie.

While Niall and Pearce are certainly right in their assessment of Judy’s death and its relation to Beth’s, there are larger considerations they overlooked. As is famously observed, Turner writes in her journal of 1893, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October that she “killed Judy to slow music” (Poole, ch. 5). The entire entry reads: “Morning wrote chapter XX, 7 Australians, killed Judy to slow music. Copied out chapters XIII and XIV. I shall be glad when it’s done” (Poole, ch. 5). The next entry, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of the same month begins: “Finished 7 Little Australians. Hurrah. I thought I’d never get to the end.” (Poole, ch. 5) The tone of her journal entries make one think that her conclusion of the novel – “My pen has been moving heavily, slowly, for these last two chapters” – is more a literal statement of fact than a sentimental expression. That, however, is an assumption. What is fact is that Turner’s emotional, personal investment was not reserved for *Seven Little Australians* and its sequels, as it was in the case of Alcott for *Little Women*. Turner drew on life and personal experience in *Three Little Maids* and *The Little Larrikin*, unlike Alcott, all of whose works are “closely interwoven with her personal life” (Cheney 394). Turner creates a story without personal investment, depicting children as representatives of a young and carefree Australia with as much detachment as possible. Written in her youth, as a way to establish her literary position and earn, the work was for Turner a light hearted look at Australia that drew its inspirations from Alcott and Frances Hodgson Burnett, the latter of whom

personally wrote to Turner to praise the work. Indeed, like Burnett's novels which involve stereotypes, crises and sentiment to trace the maturation of her young heroes and heroines, *Seven Little Australians* involve much of the same.

By contrast, *Little Women* was for Alcott a way to exorcise her ghosts; it was a personal project written at a time when she no longer faced the urgency to earn and gain fame. Written post her first trip to Europe and after the death of her younger sister Elizabeth, the sentiment in *Little Women* is experienced sentiment. Elizabeth served as the model for Beth, and Beth, as critiques often overlook, is not a stereotype, though she does conform to convention. Beth was an actual living, breathing person who was, to quote Ednah D. Cheney,

...tenderly beloved by all the family, and was indeed as pure, refined, and holy as she is represented as Beth in "Little Women." Her decay was very gradual, and she was so patient and sweet that the sad time of anxiety was a very precious one in remembrance. (Cheney 93)

The pain felt by Jo on Beth's passing was the pain felt by Alcott herself. The poem called "Our Angel in The House", which, in the novel was written by Jo for Beth, was originally written several years earlier by Louisa for Elizabeth. Unlike in Turner's novel, where there are no representatives of Turner herself, *Little Women* was for Alcott a lived experience.<sup>1</sup> The major deviation was in the characterisation of Mr. March. Mr. March is primarily an absent figure, who is for a major portion of the novel on the front, during the Civil War. In reality, and as

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<sup>1</sup> The courtship and marriage of Meg and John Brooke in the novel is that of Anna and John Pratt. The artistic Amy is the artistic May, who died at childbirth and whose daughter Lulu became the anchor Alcott held onto for the rest of her life. Marmee is the wise, gentle, patient, supportive Abba Alcott who was Louisa's biggest source of support and whose death, shortly before May's, crippled her tremendously. The "sensation stories" Jo writes to earn money are the stories Alcott herself wrote as a young girl to earn and look after her family. The descriptions of Amy and Laurie in Nice and Vevay are recollections of Alcott's own trip. Beth's death while Amy is abroad is Elizabeth's death while May was abroad. Laurie was Ladislav, a Polish boy she had met abroad.

Alcott herself notes in the journals regarding *Little Women*, it was not Mr. March who went to war, but rather Jo. That is, Alcott served as a nurse in a hospital in Georgetown during the Civil War, while the rest of her family, including her father Bronson Alcott, stayed back in Concord. However, of greater interest is Alcott's characterisation of Mr. March. Though initially absent, once he returns home he is a scholarly pastor, also an involved, responsible head of the family, which is more than one can say of Bronson Alcott, who in his absorption with Transcendentalism and creating the Utopian society Fruitlands, heavily neglected his family and was for much of Alcott's initial years, a mentally-absent father. While Alcott loved and respected him and owed her scholarly interests to him, she also regretted his lack of a sense of familial duty, thereby creating in Mr. March her ideal version of the father figure.

Critics, by focussing on the character and death of Judy who certainly is the principal character of *Seven Little Australians*, as Jo March is of *Little Women*, have overlooked the fact that while Jo is Alcott herself, Turner has no such representative in the novel, and while Bronson Alcott was inspiration for Mr. March, Turner's stepfather Charles Cope was the unsaid inspiration for Colonel Woolcot, in what is one of the very few instances where reality and fiction mesh in this novel. Colonel Woolcot is as harsh and insensitive a father towards his children as Mr. Cope was towards his. His rigid decision to send Judy to boarding school is what triggers the chain of events that in the scheme of things leads to Judy's death. Following this, while he does have slightly greater understanding of his children and loves them a bit more he remains just as harsh in the subsequent novels – rigid in his position and set in his views of how things should work. His rigidity is instead responsible for the scattered nature of his household for while he expects his children to act in a certain way he also cannot be bothered with them, preferring to leave them to the devices of his girl-wife Esther who is barely 4 years older than Meg, his eldest from his first marriage. For him there is no room for the opinions of others, just as it was for Mr. Cope who resented free choice and opinion of any sort in his wife and stepdaughters, to the point that Lillian forcibly left home to be able to marry the man of her choosing and the primary motive in



Turner's stretching out her engagement to Herbert Curlewis was linked to Nr. Cope's treatment of her mother. She was not only hesitant about committing in marriage having seen that of her parents, but she also feared for her mother in a household without her. Turner's personal feeling regarding this is surprisingly articulated by Nell in a startling question to Esther in *The Family at Misrule* – "How could you marry father? ... he is so very middle-aged and ordinary; were you really in love, Essie?" (Turner 1895, ch. 8). Esther is spared her answer by the entrance of the Captain and Meg's suitor, but the question persists for the reader.

According to Niall, the difference between the two novels is more of "period rather than nationality", arguing that the Marches have an "assured religious faith" (Niall 54) - not unlike most families in Puritan America and where the father is a priest - unlike the dysfunctional, unstructured Woolcots who draw faith and strength as a family in times of crisis. While Jo and Judy are of nearly the same age and similar in temperament, and both mourn the lack of formal education for girls; Jo and her sisters guided by this faith manifest in the form of a little copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, gifted to them by Marmee, which also gives the novel an air of moralising, which is missing in Turner. Written less than 30 years before *Seven Little Australians*, Alcott's heroines follow a prescribed path to goodness, overcoming obstacles and temptations as Christians in their own way. Meg's visit to Vanity Fair, when she allows herself to be flattered by the Moffats and is subsequently brought to reality by Laurie is reflected in Turner by Meg's coming under the influence of the vain and false Aldith MacCarthy, only to be harshly schooled by Alan Courtney, who would later marry her. Meg's lesson is learnt through experience, and while it is the same for the March sisters, they have books and family to guide them, unlike Meg and her siblings, who are their own guides. In Turner's Australia, there is no history of religious faith to lead the children. Turner's Australia is young, still finding itself; like Twain's Huckleberry Finn who had to run away to find himself, an episode that is revisited by Turner in *The Family at Misrule*, when the teenaged

Bunty runs away upon a false accusation.<sup>2</sup> This is also perhaps the only instance of Turner's employment of the Bildungsroman in the European mode where the change wrought by experience in Bunty is drastic and visible. The growth of characters in the novels of Turner and Alcott which are generally taken to be classified as bildungsroman is certainly a through development of psychological maturity following loss or crisis. In *Little Women*, the growth is certainly affected through journey – Meg's is the shortest, to *Vanity Fair*, i.e. The Moffat's house party and her psychological growth takes the longest, drawn across volumes. For Jo, Amy and Laurie they must actively leave home on their quest to attain experience, change and maturity. Beth's death is the trigger that occurs during this journey. In *Seven Little Australians* and its sequels however, the characters require several such trials to attain maturity, many of them having been too young to be psychologically marked by Judy's death. For Nell and Bunty, they too must leave home – Nell's journey is similar to that of Meg March – before they can attain growth and maturity. It is significant that it is only when the family has left home in Sydney that the moment of such attainment arrives for Esther, Meg and Pip. Judy's death, as the trigger for this excludes her from this development as she as the free Australian spirit is symbolically rejected from conventional, patriarchal society. The primary difference is of course that for Alcott's characters the quest is a conscious undertaking. For the Woolcots however the vacation turns into a tragedy that defines them for the rest of their lives.

Turner, significantly, does not indicate reading Alcott in the years preceding the publication of *Seven Little Australians*. According to Poole, her journals from 1889 are intact; earlier diaries may have been lost, allowing one to consider that perhaps all influences of reading Alcott and Burnett were drawn from memory in the writing of this novel. Certainly however, like Alcott, she was the first of the children's novelists in Australia. Both had predecessors who dedicated poetry to children, but particularly in Australia, the bulk of juvenile literature preceding Turner was imported from Europe, first with the convict ships and then with the early settlers. If one questions Turner's

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<sup>2</sup> It might be of interest that Twain sent Alcott a note in praise of the work which he had apparently not read in its entirety.

emulation of Alcott a lot is answered by this consideration. For a fledgling nation of white settlers who treated the Aborigines with suspicion and racial prejudice turning to adaptation of European culture and literature was the only way for them to create a home away from home. It is therefore not surprising that Turner would turn to the figure of Alcott as model for her own career. The beginnings of the establishment of a children's literary canon and the subsequent significant break therefore of the two settler colonies from Europe, started however, with these two women as they ventured to write wholly for children, as children with an informed idea of the workings of a child's mind and not as adults writing for children for the purpose of moralising.

## II

Beyond the connection shared by Alcott and Turner of being the first writers of their kind in juvenile literature, Alcott and Turner are also connected by the political and colonial histories of their respective nations. British colonisation of America preceded that of Australia's by at least two centuries while European colonization of America began much before. By the time Alcott wrote and published *Little Women* in 1868-69, America had gained its independence, formed a federation and was in the midst of Civil War to abolish slavery.

Interestingly, while the Alcotts identified themselves as Abolitionists and Mr. March, and later John Brooke, are fighting in the Civil War in the novel, the knowledge and indication of slavery hovers only as background awareness in not only *Little Women* itself, but also in her journals. While in her journals, Alcott often recounts attending Anti-Slavery meetings and festivals, there is no actual physical presence of African-Americans. At one point she recalls a fugitive slave her mother had hidden away in the oven. The other mention is not by Alcott but her biographer, Ednah. D. Cheney and the focus is May's paintings:

Among the pictures painted by May at this time the most remarkable is the portrait of a negro girl, which is a very faithful study from life, and gives the color and characteristic traits of a beautiful negro without

exaggeration. The expression of the eyes is tender and pathetic, well-suited to the fate of a slave girl. Such earnest study would have borne richer fruit if longer life had been hers. (Cheney 130)

While Cheney's description betrays presumption and bias, the war at the background of *Little Women* could be any war; it is only with the dates of the setting of the novel that one can gauge it to be the Civil War.

Of greater concern however is Alcott's treatment of Native Americans, the doubly colonized, who have been so hunted and marginalized by this time that they are literally and physically on the fringes, to the point that despite being over 400 years after contact, perceptions regarding them remain unchanged. Alcott betrays an oversight and assumes knowledge of the Native American people – knowledge gained entirely by hearsay and her reading of colonial writing and not personal experience – expecting and depicting them to be the uncivilized heathens and barbarians of popular imaginations. In December 1859, several years before *Little Women*, she vaguely notes writing an "Indian story". In *Little Women*, only two references depict them as warlike and barbaric, as the genteel of Massachusetts would assume them to be. The first is fairly innocent – upon Mr. March's return home, Laurie's expression of delight is almost equal to his having let out an "Indian war whoop", which is an image in keeping with the situations concocted by childlike imaginations in their play. The other seems equally innocent and is what sets Jo on the path to sensational writing, but the implications are of a deep rooted disgust and racism. While at a lecture, Jo sees a boy reading a newspaper story with the following painting –

... melodramatic illustration of an Indian in full war costume, tumbling over a precipice with a wolf at his throat, while two infuriated young gentlemen, with unnaturally small feet and big eyes, were stabbing each other close by, and a disheveled female was flying away

in the background with her mouth wide open.” (Alcott, 1868-69, ch. 27)

The Indian is painted as he is assumed by the white Anglo-Saxon Puritan settlers to be, as almost bestial, a threat to the safety of women and a creature to be hunted into extinction – a perception that is echoed by white settlers in Australia well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly in Turner's time.

Turner wrote her work barely a 100 years after Australian colonization by white European settlers at a time when uniquely Australian literature was yet nascent. Turner for her part had immigrated to Australia as a young child with her widowed mother and sisters and while she bore no love for England as her homeland, she looked to Europe for literary inspiration and as a guide. Living in Sydney herself, she set her fictional family near the Parramatta River and as one would expect, an urbanized setting such as this would exclude Aboriginal presence. Moreover, in regular correspondence with figures like “Banjo” Paterson and Henry Lawson, who, with his family, in fact depended much on Turner for literary support and guidance as can be seen in her diaries, and a staple reading list of Swinburne, Eliot, Tennyson and the like, Turner was put in a situation where while she venerated the white Australian bushman who braved the harshness of the land, she turned an eye almost blind towards the Aborigines. Her journals within the years of 1889–1952 make absolutely no mention of Aboriginals. *Seven Little Australians* in fact begins with her speculating the cause behind the “naughtiness” of Australian children –

It may be that the land and the people are young-hearted together, and the children's spirits not crushed and saddened by the shadow of long years' sorrowful history. There is a lurking sparkle of joyousness and rebellion and mischief in nature here, and therefore in children. (Turner 1897, ch. 1)

Turner's judgement of the land entirely excludes the 40000 years of Aboriginal history preceding the conversion of Australia as a penal colony, attributing a “sorrowful history” to England alone. Immediately

after that however, describing the children at a raucous tea, unpresided over by a governess, Turner draws a distinction between Europe and Australia, calling “tea” a European institution with Australian burdened with no such tradition. This is a distinction that is subtly deepened as the novel progresses as the unruly, lawless, children, born and brought up in Australia are put on firmly opposing sides against their rigid, unsympathetic and English father (Pearce 99-100). What Turner seems to display therefore is what W.E.H. Stanner calls “The great Australian silence” regarding the Aborigines (Brantlinger, 147)<sup>3</sup>. However, even while saying that it must taken into account that while Turner has no mention of Aborigines in her journals, she does include them with some prominence in *Seven Little Australian*. Patrick Brantlinger asks, “Was ‘the great Australian silence’ just a more extreme version of the marginalization and extermination of indigenous peoples elsewhere in Britain’s colonies of white settlement? Or was it categorically different?” (126). Turner, in this, case would probably fall under the category of “different”. Tettawonga might be the only Aboriginal in the novel, living on the cattle-farm in Yarrahappini, the home of Esther’s parents, the Hassals, but while he is treated with the usual white ignorance of urban Australians, he is also treated with a deal of generosity for the times by Turner, infact even claiming the fact that all Aborigines are not murderers and perverts; uncivilized certainly seeing how all he does is smoke and drink all day, but not that.

“Fifteen years ago he had killed with his tomahawk one of two bushrangers who were trying to pick up Yarrahappini in the absence of his master, and he had carried little trembling Mrs. Hassal and tiny Esther to place of safety, and gone back and dealt the other one a blow on the head that stunned him till assistance came. So, of course, he had earned his right to the cottage and the daily rations and the pipe that never stirred from his lips.” (Turner 1897, ch. 16)

This, one would say, stands as an essential difference between Alcott and Turner. Turner deigns to depict what Alcott has ignored.

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<sup>3</sup> Stanner, W. E. H., *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938–1973*. Canberra. Australian National University Press. 1979. p. 147. (Original Source)

Moreover, while the sphere of movement in *Little Women* is confined to Concord, New York, and Europe, Turner ventures out with her young Australian to unknown territory to untamed Australia. Despite that however, Turner's perception is still one-sided, though one might say it is to be expected of a young girl who had till then not ventured out of Sydney. Judy, as untamed as the Australian landscape, is killed by a falling gum-tree at Yarrahappini allowing Niall to say that it was perhaps "an invitation to consider the hostility of nature in Australia" (Niall 54). Turner, in this choice of location juxtaposes the dangers of the land with not just the beauty of land but also the Aboriginal marks left behind –

Krangi-Bahtoo— or Duck Water, as, less prettily, we should call it— was the name given to the head of the creek, which had scooped out the earth till it made itself a beautiful ravine just there, with precipitous rocks and boulders that the kangaroos skipped across and played hide-and-seek behind with hunters, and great towering blue gums and red gums, that seemed to lose themselves in the blue, blue sky-canopy above.

Tettawonga told of a Bunyip that dwelt where the trickling water had made a pool, deep and beautiful, and delicate ferns had crept tenderly to fringe its edge, and blackwood, and ti-trees grown up thick and strong for a girdle. (Turner 1897, ch. 18)

It is therefore a land that elicits fear and awe simultaneously and Tettawonga with his smoke and drink and alien ways and stories becomes symbolic of this. Turner's depiction of Tettawonga is entirely honest to what she has known so far. While condescending in her attitude towards him, he is entirely representative of her knowledge, however limited, of the Aborigines. As in all contemporary depictions of aborigines in novels so as to add to the uniqueness of the work and separate it from their European forefathers and yet would care to learn neither their language nor ways (Brantlinger 126–127), Tettawonga speaks in "pidgin" English, a simplified, partly-successful attempt at mimicking Queen's English by the aboriginal people. His accent, as

given him by Turner, is garbled and his English difficult to understand, yet he is also a great storyteller, as evident in the extract quoted above, making Turner complicit to what Terry Goldie calls the process of “indigenization”<sup>4</sup> (Brantlinger 126–127), the inclusion of native voices and culture into white literature for the process of enrichment. This however is where the complexity of *Seven Little Australians* lies.

The original edition of *Seven Little Australians* in 1894 included in it an aboriginal story called Tettawonga's Story, which having heard from Tettawonga, the manager of the farm, Mr. Gillet narrates to the young Woolcots at the picnic at Krangi-Bahtoo. Turner, in her journals, records the reactions to this particular edition. The second edition, curiously enough, very cleanly deletes this story from the text; Turner's journals indicate neither how nor why, forgoing any mention of it at all in fact. It is not till the centenary edition in 1994 that the story was restored to its proper place. This complicates the issue of Turner's “silence” regarding the aborigines, for while the original inclusion of the story establishes Turner as a writer interested in aboriginal culture and mythology, who would necessarily have had to research the story as it is doubtful it was part of her own reading habits and that of her circle, her absolute silence regarding this issue at all and indeed any background work behind this in her journals raises more questions than it answers.

The story itself purports to be a story of the Koorie people of New South Wales, Tettawonga's people. It is the story of “How The Kookaburra Got Its Laugh” (Turner 1894, 163-166). Whether it is an actual story of the Koorie people is debatable as several variations and versions to the story in Dreamtime exist, but in all probability it is real. Like in most aboriginal myths and folktales, the principal characters are birds and animals teaching the Koorie people lessons. Here, the lesson is simply of ‘one gets as one does’ or ‘what goes around comes around’. The issue lies not in the text of the story itself, but rather in Alcott's choice of narrator.

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<sup>4</sup> Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), p. 13. (Original article)



That Turner has an Englishman, Mr. Gillet narrate the story seems to indicate that Turner was perhaps postulating and encouraging on the part of the settlers a wholesome incorporation of Aboriginal culture in their own aesthetics and acknowledging them as a people with histories and stories. However, one might also say otherwise, as Brantlinger does,

As colonial authors sought ways to produce literatures that were both original and true to the contexts in which they wrote, indigenization offered a compelling, albeit contradictory, solution. This meant more than simply portraying indigenous characters in novels, poems, and plays and making them speak pidgin English. It also meant incorporating indigenous myths, legends, and stories into their texts — in short, reproducing, imitating, or at least citing the oral narratives of the indigenous peoples the colonists were exploiting, displacing, and often exterminating. (Brantlinger 133)

This leads to the issue of the story's subsequent exclusion. If that were the case, Turner's incorporation of the story would be a part of this process and therefore, from the white perspective, good thing. Clare Bradford says, "The main effect of the omission of Tettawonga's story is...to achieve a less problematic version of the Australian past than the one which prevails in the book's first edition" (Bradford 4) but that neither entirely justifies the exclusion nor Turner's own silence regarding that. The cause perhaps lies at the very beginning of Mr. Gillet's narration.

Once upon a time' (Judy sniffed at the old-fashioned beginning), 'once upon a time,' said Mr. Gillet, 'when this young land was still younger, and incomparably more beautiful, when Tettawonga's ancestors were brave and strong and happy as careless children, when their worst nightmare had never shown them so evil a time as the white man would bring their race, when--' 'Oh, get on!' muttered Pip impatiently. (Turner 1894, 163-164)

Mr. Gillet, on narrating the folktale begins with calling his own people an evil. Pip's interruption prevents further castigation of the actions of the white man with regard to the aborigines, but the damage has been done. Turner, in what is the first novel for white children in Australia, goes onto to expose her own people.

This leads one to consider therefore the role of her editors and publishers, not just of *Seven Little Australians* but also of her Diaries. It is well noted that William Steele of Ward Lock, Turner's editors, reprimanded and subsequently modified her use of the vernacular, to the point of asking her to spend time in England, gain a

little English experience [which] would help to (excuse my so putting it) correct the free and easy, somewhat rowdy associations due to atmosphere, climate, environment and the influence of the Bulletin ... To ensure your complete success, the English people must be reckoned with, and that is why I advocate your staying for a time in their midst. (Niall 55)

With this in mind, it would do well to ask whether the exclusion of the story was an act of the editors whose priority would be to placate and gain English readers who would not react favourably to Turner, through Mr. Gillet, calling the white man evil. In all likelihood, it probably was, though it does not explain Turner's complete silence regarding this in her diaries, allowing one to question Phillipa Poole's editing of them at this point.

Poole claims in her Introduction to *The Diaries of Ethel Turner* that while the dairies are for the most part intact and complete, she has also combined entries, especially of the diaries recording her Europe experience – "It will be apparent that not every day has been recorded, for to do so would have required many volumes. Therefore, in order to conserve space, and also for ease of reading, I have occasionally combined two days' entries together." (Poole, 'Before You Fairly

Start')<sup>5</sup>. This allows one to speculate that during the editing process, Poole, who as Turner's granddaughter, would not be an entirely unbiased editor, edited out sections discussing knowledge of aboriginal myths and the issue of the exclusion of Tettawonga's Lost Story, to preserve her grandmother's image as a matriarch of children's literature in Australia and a representative of the European tradition in the Australian literary scene, therefore, "creating" a silence for Turner.

Simple as her novels might seem, Turner therefore occupies a problematic position with editors and publishers perhaps more responsible for her reputation than she herself, as she, knowingly and unknowingly and certainly posthumously allows her reach and reputation to be determined and moulded by them. Turner's novel therefore provides for a unique moment in the children's history of Australia, not only as being the first of its kind to be written and published on Australian soil, but like Turner herself who immigrated to Australia from England as a child, it provides a link between the scene of children's literature in Australia and its European and American predecessors, as Turner tries to accomplish through this work, which has never gone out of print, the dual aim of not only emulating Europe and America but also firmly establishing the literary scene for children in Australia.

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<sup>5</sup> An Introduction by Poole before the main texts of the diaries begin. As a Kindle edition, it does not come with identifiable page numbers.

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