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Australian children's picture books, the Frontier Wars, and Joseph Campbell's hero with a thousand faces

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ABSTRACT

Frank Uhr and Debra O'Halloran's *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* (2019) is one of the few children's picture books that explore the Australian Frontier Wars. In terms of message, the author and illustrator subsume First Nations' resistance into the nation's broader celebration of its participation in foreign wars. In terms of medium, they use the overwhelmingly conservative genre of picture books to deradicalise a potentially controversial topic, one that they frame using Joseph Campbell's conception of the monomyth. Campbell's development of the monomyth, widely referred to by his major work *The hero with a thousand faces* (1949/2008) was drawn from his sustained academic study of comparative mythology. He found a similar pattern emerging in a multitude of story forms, fairy tales, songs, and sonnets, and within sacred writings, dreamings, and monologue accounts. The canonical narrative arc of the hero's journey has three core elements. It begins as the hero receives a 'call to adventure' and leaves the ordinary world (Separation or Departure). He or she enters an extraordinary world that requires engagement in a range of trials and challenges (Initiation), before returning home to the ordinary world, irreversibly transfigured (Return). *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* is framed by this trajectory, thereby ensuring a familiarity that belies the reader's lack of knowledge as to its origin. The author and illustrator thereby avoid too overt a challenge to the ideological and genre-based expectations of their readers.

KEYWORDS

Battle of Meewah, Children's Literature, Frontier Wars, Joseph Campbell, Monomyth, Picture Books

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Introduction

On 13 September 2021 the annual commemoration of the Battle of Meewah was held at Bill Gould's Lookout, Tobruk Memorial Drive, in the Queensland regional city of Toowoomba, Australia.[1] The event was organised by The Friends of Multuggerah, a community group dedicated to the memory of an Indigenous guerrilla leader of the Jagerra nation, who in 1843 united warriors from across several different groups to challenge the increasing encroachment of Queensland pastoralists. Although it was not a decisive victory in a broader sense, given that the dispossession of First Nations people was slowed rather than halted, the battle is historically significant as it constituted the first major setback to white settlement in Queensland (Kerkhove & Uhr, 2019). The commemoration of Meewah and the skirmishes associated with it are part of a long overdue challenge to the widespread and erroneous perception that there was no organised warfare on the frontier. The violence in Queensland, for example, was protracted, and continued into the 1890s. It was marked by well documented atrocities that were "gruesome events – even by Australian frontier standards … as always, however both the settlers and the police worked in the interests of pastoralism, and ultimately of colonial and imperial governments" (Rogers & Bain, 2016, p. 87).

Such was the extent of the violence, and the degree of official agency, there is a compelling case for it to be considered genocide (Richards, 2008). Regardless of whether it constitutes state sanctioned genocide, or "societally-led genocide", it is clear nonetheless that there was considerable public support for a policy of extermination (Palmer, 2000). There is a growing awareness, that claims such as those made by Keith Windshuttle (2003) that "there was nothing on the Aborigines' side that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle or systematic resistance of any kind" are flawed (p. 26). For as Stephen Gapps (2018) argues, the raids conducted by Sydney's First Nations people "had all the hallmarks of guerrilla warfare: raiding and retreating and engaging the enemy when in a superior situation" (p. 5). Too often, however, research into the Frontier Wars has focused on the actions of the settlers and groups such as the Native Mounted Police (Kerkhove, 2021). Indigenous tactics such as communication networks, the co-ordination of allied groups, and the use of what in a European context would be described as military intelligence, have not received commensurate interest (Kerkhove, 2023; Kerkhove, 2020; see also article by Samuel White in this issue). As a result, "the vigour of Aboriginal resistance [is] forgotten… Tribesmen and women [are] pitied rather than respected" (Reynolds, 2013, p. 14). Too often they are dismissed as the passive victims of colonial expansion "whose fate was simply to suffer and to die" (Reynolds, 2020, para. 20).

The ceremony in Toowoomba was, nevertheless, a relatively effective and at times poignant challenge to the hegemonic narrative of terra nullius and the benign European settlement that it facilitated.[2] It was hampered, however, by the perceived need to balance the desire to radically challenge this narrative with a respect for the nation's war time history, which remains a bedrock of national identity. The failure of the Australian War Memorial, arguably the nation's most important cultural institution, to commemorate the Frontier Wars is the most public example of this tension. Alan Stephens (2014) is far from being the only Australian historian to see this silence as "historically dishonest" (para. 1), an impediment to reconciliation, and a conscious decision by officialdom to ignore "pre-Federation indigenous warriors who fought invaders for their homeland, their families, and their way of life" (para. 19). As Terry Garwood (1993), then director of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria wrote in the early 1990s, "Whatever the fate of the ANZAC legend, Aboriginal people were given no place in it. Their contribution to the defence of Australia has been excluded through neglect" (p. xi). Even the well-intentioned efforts to recognise First

Nation's soldiers who served in the Australian Defence Force after Federation in 1901 are problematic. For they can minimise, or even obscure, the proud tradition of resistance to British invasion, of which the Battle of Meewah is only one example (Gibson, 2014). As Stephen Garton (1996) observes, the Anzac mythology continues to exert an artistic tyranny over Australian war commemoration, and indeed, even what events are worthy of being remembered. Nevertheless, when it is handled sensitively, as it is by groups such as The Friends of Multuggerah, it is possible to create a "cohesive historical narrative in which both the frontier wars and Gallipoli feature as key moments in Australian history can create new and constructive understandings of our past" (Bailey & Brawley, 2008, p. 33).

The choice facing the organisers, many of whom are passionate First Nation's people driven by a desire to commemorate their ancestors' resistance and their spiritual connection to the land, is whether to integrate their commemoration with wider commemorative practices such as Anzac Day or to carve out a distinct ideological position with its own rituals of commemoration. As with many commemorative projects, they chose compromise over conflict. The result is an integration of both approaches: a traditional welcome, the playing of the didgeridoo, and an address by a Gomeroi woman were very much in keeping with the day as a First Nations commemoration. Other rituals were drawn, it would seem, directly from the traditional Anzac 'liturgy', the nation's de facto national day which though outwardly secular is widely characterised as an expression of displaced Christianity (Billings, 2015). The wreath laying, one by members of the 25/49 Battalion, a local unit with a long association with the region, and one by a visiting school group, a one-minute silence, the distribution of symbolic handmade Sturt Desert Peas rather than poppies, and the use of the phrase 'lest we forget' make use of familiar symbols and ritual acts. A short address by an officer of the 25/49 battalion recognised Multaggerah's status as an Indigenous warrior of considerable repute, but also contextualised his achievements within the framework of First Nations servicemen and women in the Australian Defence Force. Multuggerah's victory with all its radical potential was thereby subtlety merged into an otherwise hegemonic European narrative.

As this article will show, Frank Uhr and Debra O'Halloran's (2019) *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain*, one of the few children's picture books that explore the Frontier Wars, makes the same compromise. In terms of message, the author and illustrator subsume First Nations' resistance into the nation's broader celebration of its participation in foreign wars. In terms of medium, they use the overwhelmingly conservative genre of picture books to deradicalise a potentially controversial topic, one that they frame using Joseph Campbell's ubiquitous conception of the monomyth, or as it is more widely known, the hero with a thousand faces. This is a familiar motif, for though Campbell's hero is traditionally driven by specific situations and circumstances, his innate opposition to oppression, immorality, and the inflictions of evil ensure the framework's relevance across human cultures, time, and space. Modern children's picture books are a particularly effective vehicle for this approach, both because it is familiar and for the didactic potential it offers. For *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* does not threaten the belief system of many of the adults who buy the book or the children who read it. Instead, it reassures them that though the picture book is 'modern' it does not seriously challenge traditional understandings of Australian history and identity, while nevertheless still highlighting a previously overlooked experience of frontier violence and resistance.

Children's picture books

The children at the commemoration in Toowoomba will almost certainly have been exposed to picture books, which comprise an important part of a child's early literacy experiences. They offer numerous benefits for young children that are often quite divorced from historical accuracy, ranging from the creation of a framework for building empathy, tolerance, and friendships, reinforce social-emotional wellbeing, problem-solving, and the acquisition of conflict resolution skills (Kemple, 2004), acquiring new vocabulary (Crowe, Norris, & Hoffman, 2004), expressing themselves with appropriate semantic and syntactic usage (Prutting & Kirchner, 1987), increasing

their sense of belonging and self-affirmation (Botelho & Rudman, 2009), and developing a range of personal, social, and intellectual benefits (Browne, 1996). In addition to these benefits to socialisation, children's picture books are profoundly ideological, constructed as they are "by a particular people for particular reasons, at a certain time" (Eagleton, 1996, p. 10). Stories that touch on foundational events tied to a nation's history, such as wars, can make a significant contribution to the creation and maintenance of a "national soul" (Hazard, 1983, p. 11). This contribution to childhood development is particularly significant as picture books are usually chosen by parents or family members, and as such are an important indicator of contemporary attitudes and morals (Kerby, Curtis, Bedford & Baguley, 2022; Kerby, Baguley, Bedford & Maddock, 2022; Macdonald, 2022; Baguley & Kerby, 2021; Kerby & Baguley, 2020; Kerby, Baguley, & MacDonald, 2017; Flothow, 2007). Writing in a Canadian context, Jerry Diakiw (1997, cited in Brown, 2003) concurs, noting that "our identities, our attitude to people of different races, our sense of self and therefore probably our sense of national identity or lack of it are largely fixed by the end of elementary school" (p. 43).

Depending on the quality of a picture book, it has the potential to "look beneath the bitumen of public rhetoric" (Spittel, 2017, p. 203) and explore "the unruly tussle between popular and unofficial road of remembrance" (Scates 2015, in Spittel, 2017, p. 204). This credibility ensures that it has the capacity to challenge hegemonic power structures and to develop attitudes that subsequently inform a child's identity (Goscilo, 2014; Frank, 2002). Yet like the Anzac mythology more broadly, a picture book remains vulnerable to being co-opted into serving "differing ideological and political interests" (Darian-Smith & Hamilton, 1994, p. 2). As Clare Rhoden (2012) argues, this use of war literature didactically for either nationalistic or pacifist purposes is an ethically contentious practice, noting that several educational specialists such as Robert Jeffcoate (1990), Jan Kociumbas (1997) and Kate Agnew and Geoff Fox (2001) deem it "inappropriate" (p. 5). It is important, therefore, that as more authors engage with the Frontier Wars, as surely, they will, their approach will be subject to close interrogation. For as is the case with children's literature generally, picture books are often "specifically identified as telling the truth" (MacCallum-Stewart 2007, p. 178); the question remains, however, as to what truth they are telling.

In addition to the expectation that they should be "sanitary, benign, and didactic" (Tribunella 2010, p. 102), picture books are also remarkably conservative; in a recent audit, ninety-nine percent of picture books used in Australian early childhood classrooms were identified as promoting dominant cultural viewpoints (Adam, 2019; Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020). The use of Campbell's conception of the hero therefore turns potentially traumatic history into a "universal of human experience" (Stephens, 1992, p. 238) rather than a narrative grounded in an historical event. It also facilitates an approach that Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2007) identifies in Great War literature as the "parable of war". It is an "emotive, literary retelling … based on a series of texts and cultural shifts rather than on historical perspectives". This is particularly important given the ideological impact of literature on children as it "privileges recent political and ideological beliefs rather than the actual events. This erases subtleties of distinction and contrasts in behaviour and/or belief" (pp. 177-178).

A familiar rhetoric and framework

Uhr and O'Halloran's exploration of the Indigenous resistance leader Multuggerah in the medium of a children's picture book skirts rather than confronts the uncertain place in Australia's history occupied by both their protagonist and the war he fought. The book is better understood as a celebration of First Nations warriors as proto-Anzacs whose battlefield prowess is framed by Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' as a universal human experience of adventure and transcendence. Campbell is unlikely to be a name familiar to any of Uhr and O'Halloran's readers, and indeed only a few of the purchasing public, yet the familiarity of the framework is comforting when used in a book intended for children that touches on issues of war, death, and genocide. Campbell's development of the monomyth, widely referred to by his major work *The hero with a*

thousand faces (1949/2008) was drawn from his sustained academic study of comparative mythology. He found a similar pattern emerging in a multitude of story forms, fairy tales, songs, and sonnets, and within sacred writings, dreamings, and monologue accounts. The canonical narrative arc of the hero's journey has three core elements. It begins as the hero receives a 'call to adventure' and leaves the ordinary world (Separation or Departure). He or she enters an extraordinary world that requires engagement in a range of trials and challenges (Initiation), before returning home to the ordinary world, irreversibly transfigured (Return). Joshua Cruz and Nadia Kellam (2017) refer to this as the "archetypal trajectory" in which Campbell's hero follows a universal structure or collective template across several stages (p. 174). *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* is framed by this trajectory, thereby ensuring a familiarity that belies the reader's lack of knowledge as to its origin. The author and illustrator thereby avoid making too overt a challenge to the ideological and genre-based expectations of their readers.

Separation of departure

In keeping with Campbell's first stage, Multuggerah is positioned as a hero who is predisposed to potential adventure or a call to adventure by his dissatisfaction, deep dismay, and experience of struggle and turmoil. Multuggerah is "worried for his people's future" given the continuing encroachment of Europeans and their flocks of sheep. The picture book opens with a large image of Multuggerah, who is described only as "a First Nations Leader from a long time ago". This opening partially unmoors Multuggerah's story from its historical context, for while Campbell's hero is driven by specific situations and circumstances, his innate opposition to oppression, immorality, and the infliction of evil empathetically resonate across human cultures, time, and space. The observation that "Multuggerah did not like sheep, nor did he like the men who put them on his country" references a specific situation. The next piece of text counters that specificity and encourages empathy by noting that they "spoilt the country, scared away the native floods, and fouled the water", thereby casting Europeans as the antithesis of the landscape, interlopers who have no place in the natural order. This has a particular resonance given that the Australian landscape is a powerful symbol of historical continuity (Kerby & Baguley, 2023) with artistic renderings of it "remaining the most iconic and popular … in Australian culture" (Radford, 2007, p. 23). Multuggerah's decision to meet six leaders from surrounding groups to orchestrate attacks on European settlement appears an understandable reaction to readers immersed in a culture that venerates battlefield courage and sees the landscape as an equally central component of national identity. That he meets them on "his sacred mountain" only serves to emphasise the First Nations peoples link to the land and the altruism of their motivation compared to the destruction wrought by European settlement. The war that they wage is not one of conquest, for the land is at the basis of all Australian First Nations relationships, economies, identities, and cultural practices. It is believed that "by 'feeling' the land … a person is 'made' or really exists" (Kohen, 2004, p. 229). The call to adventure generated by this turmoil has been heralded by what Campbell would have characterised as an encounter with forces not fully understood, in this case, a culture and an approach to the landscape that is vastly different to that espoused by First Nations peoples.

Initiation

The second stage of the hero's journey is the 'road of trials', which is the most substantive component of the monomyth. It can take the form of a myriad of ordeals and tests, perilous journeys, complexity and betrayals, and the appearance of miraculous or supernatural phenomena. In this case, however, Uhr and O'Halloran do not employ a figure as a symbolic guide. Instead, it is the landscape that acts as a talisman. It protects Multuggerah's warriors as they protect it. In contrast, the illustrations by O'Halloran show the settlers dwarfed by the landscape, milling about on the periphery of the Frontier, or tied to makeshift roads swathed in darkness. While this landscape offers succour to Multuggerah and his warriors, in contrast, the settlers' engagement with the landscape is more in keeping with a Great War sensibility, one which was

characterised by the "sharp dividing of landscape into known and unknown, safe and hostile" (Fussell, 1977, p. 76).

The First Nations' leaders identify the reliance on bullock drays to carry supplies as a point of weakness to be exploited. By stopping the drays on the mountain pass, Multuggerah and his warriors hope to force the settlers to "move away to other lands" (Uhr & O'Halloran, 2019). Significantly, they do not seek to gain ownership of the land, for theirs is not a war of conquest. They do not conceive of the landscape as another enemy to confront. It is portrayed throughout the story as a living character, one that is a valuable ally in their resistance to colonial intrusion. In contrast, during the Great War, the battlefields of Gallipoli and the Western Front were, like the Australian Outback, positioned as "new lands to be claimed" rather than protected (Hoffenberg, 2001, p. 114). As a key component of the national imagining of the Great War this positioning of landscape as a powerful symbol of historical continuity is regularly used in Australian picture books.

Given Henry Reynolds (2013) astute observation that for First Nations' Australians, the Frontier War was their Great War, Uhr and O'Halloran can draw on very powerful beliefs about landscape and the place of the 'hero' in the national story. As the Official Historian and founder of the Australian War Memorial, Charles Bean helped establish in the national psyche a "cult of the individual as hero, who because of the influence of the bush and his frontier background is already a natural soldier who has only to pick up a rifle to be ready for battle" (Pugsley, 2004, p. 47). Though Multuggerah and his warriors pick up spears rather than rifles, they successfully ambush the settlers and their supply drays before retiring to their "sacred mountain" from where they repel an attack. They do not fear the landscape as an unexplored and dangerous place. As both author and illustrator are clearly aware, though the landscape possesses a physical nature, it is also, as Tuan (1979) observes, a construct of the mind. Nevertheless, Multuggerah and his warriors must travel a road of trials as they defend their land and seek to eject European settlement.

The return

Given that the victory at Meewah was a short-lived success, Uhr and O'Halloran must restrict their vision to the immediate aftermath. Though Campbell's framework allows for a return to the ordinary marked by further adventure or continued vexation, Uhr notes only that "All the First Nations leaders were happy, and Multuggerah wished them all a safe journey home, knowing that they had won on the day". The short postscript indicating that Multuggerah was killed three years later leading a raid on a Station is the only evidence that the completion of the hero-quest does not end with Multuggerah's return home to share a boon for the potential benefit of all. This self-imposed narrative limitation allows the author and illustrator to frame the events of the book using Campbell's monomyth without acknowledging that in this case, the hero's quest is a literary rather than historical success. This reflects Uhr's background as one of a small number of predominantly white historians who have made a significant contribution to rediscovering the historical story of Multuggerah. While his research conforms to the broad expectations that history is factual, his work on *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* is, in contrast, motivated by an unashamedly didactic purpose:

> Multuggerah came to me as a hero that kids could aspire to [be]. I grew up in a white society where our heroes were Ray Lindwall and people like that. The aboriginal kids don't have their own heroes and I thought we could endorse [Multuggerah] as a hero. (Uhr, interview, 20 September 2021)

The book was in fact first conceived of as the first in a series, one which would add fictionalised events and lift Multuggerah "even further up the scale of hero" (Uhr, interview). Indeed, Uhr was determined to make his story generalisable; the decision to use the descriptor First Nations rather than linking Multuggerah explicitly to a particular clan or tribe "makes him Australian as opposed to just [belonging to] a clan from the Lockyer Valley" (Uhr, interview). This extended to Uhr's view

of where the story fits into the broader history of the region and the nation; it should be "a dual history. It's an Australian history. Not an Aboriginal history or a white history" (Uhr, interview). What the First Nations people would make of their victory being repurposed as a dual history is open to question, but the very broadness of the narrative as Uhr and O'Halloran conceive it, allows for the use of Campbell's monomyth within the framework established by the Australian reverence for actions on the battlefield.

Conclusion

The Meewah commemorations in Toowoomba differ from traditional Anzac Day ceremonies conducted in towns and cities across Australia in one very important way. They are conducted in situ, on a battlefield, rather than using the cenotaph, or empty tomb, as a symbolic connection with those who fought and died 'somewhere over there'. As one of the First Nation organisers observes, however, the "whole country was a battlefield". Australians have tended to look abroad when linking conceptions of nationhood with heroes who made their name in battle; First Nations people do not have to look anywhere near as far. In addition to acting as "repositories for reconstructions of the past, Australian war histories [such as children's picture books] indoctrinate adolescent readers into the Anzac tradition, thereby maintaining the dominance of Anzac in the Australian national psyche" (Potter, 2016, p. 38). Australian picture books that explore conflict are more than just literature, for they become "textual monuments" that act "as points of reference through which younger generations can learn about, and (re)imagine anew, cultural memories associated with the Anzac Legend'' (Allan, 2013, p. 138). By using Campbell's monomyth to frame their narrative, Uhr and O'Halloran explore a battle and a conflict that has as yet exerted little impact on this process. However, the familiarity of the framework acts as an entry point for the reader exposed to the story of Multuggerah for the first time. From there, it may well make its way into the national mythology. For though the conceptualisation of the hero's journey by Campbell is probably unknown to many purchasers of the book, the children who subsequently read it can read complexly (Duncum, 2021). The familiarity of the journey therefore allows for a deep engagement with the story as it is reminiscent of a wide variety of books and films with which potential readers are already fully immersed.

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