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Dismal, Didactic, or Delightful?

New Zealand picture books of the 1940s and 1950s

Kay Hancock

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by

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Illustration by Mollie Miller Atkinson, from:

Richard Bird in the Bush. Wellington, N.Z.: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1944.

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Dismal, Didactic, or Delightful? New Zealand picture books of the 1940s and 1950s

This investigation of New Zealand picture books arose out of my doctoral research in which I explore the 1963 Ready to Read series as New Zealand children's literature. The series was developed by the School Publications Branch of the Department of Education as a national, graded reading series for students in the first three years of school, replacing the Janet and John books that the Department had been importing from England. The new books were designed to reflect the lives of their young readers, demonstrating the commitment of the Department to providing New Zealand materials for New Zealand students (Hancock, iii)[1]. Another important aim for the new series was to help children develop a love of reading. As part of establishing the literary context for the 1963 series, I wanted to find out more about the New Zealand picture books that were available at the time and, in particular, to investigate how they portrayed New Zealand children. This paper describes my research process and my findings.

The research process

I developed three research questions:

> What are some characteristics of New Zealand picture books published in the 1940s and 1950s?
>
> How are New Zealand children and lifestyles portrayed in New Zealand picture books of the 1940s and 1950s?
>
> What is the relationship between New Zealand picture books of the 1940s and 1950s and the books that were published in the 1963 Ready to Read series?

I used Betty Gilderdale's comprehensive account of New Zealand children's publishing, *A Sea Change: 145 years of New Zealand Junior Fiction* (1982) as a starting point for identifying relevant books. I then crosschecked Gilderdale's lists with information in the National Library catalogue and copies of the books, including some from the Dorothy Neal White Collection and some purchased in second hand shops.

I found, however, such variation within the format of the books that it was often difficult to decide if a book could indeed be described as a picture book or not. Today, the picture book section of any book shop will be easily distinguished by its displays of large format (often landscape orientated), colourful, highly illustrated books of about thirty-two pages, generally, with small amounts of text on each page. In contrast, the children's books published in the 1940s and 1950s came in many different shapes and sizes, ranged from five pages to over forty, and were often sparsely illustrated and text-heavy. Some had characteristics of both fiction and non-fiction. These included photograph-caption books, information books written as

fictional narratives, and fantasy narratives that contain sections of detailed factual information— and some books that seem intended as school reading materials.

In order to clarify the concept of "picture book" and ensure as close an alignment as possible between the target audience for New Zealand picture books and the Ready to Read books, I developed criteria to guide my selection. The books had to:

- be published between 1940 and 1959;
- have fewer than forty pages;
- be written by New Zealand authors;
- be published in New Zealand (to distinguish them from works by New Zealand authors that were published overseas and intended primarily for an international audience);
- have a high proportion of illustrations to text (ideally at least one illustration for each double-page spread);
- be intended for purchase by the general public (for example, not part of an instructional reading series for use in schools);
- be fiction and have a primary intention to entertain rather than to convey factual information;
- seem intended for a similar audience to readers of the Ready to Read materials (children aged five to seven years).

Guided by these criteria, I focus discussion on seventeen books. I also refer briefly to others in regard to specific aspects.

What are some characteristics of New Zealand picture books published in the 1940s and 1950s?

It seems that picture book publishing was, to a large extent, a fledgling and experimental industry in these years. Gilderdale notes in her entry for *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991) that no New Zealand picture books had been published before the 1940s and only five published by 1950 (464-65). A.H. and A. W. Reed were the most prolific publishers with Whitcombe and Tombs (who specialised in educational books) and Oswald-Sealy (New Zealand) the only other large publishing companies involved. Publishing information within the books studied for this paper indicates that a surprisingly high proportion of picture book publishing was carried out by smaller, independent provincial publishing companies. Examples include Democracy Publishing, Progressive Publishing, and Modern Books based in Wellington; Belvedere Press, Pelorous Press, Unity Press, and Colenso Press in Auckland; S. N. Brown and Williamson Jeffery in Dunedin; Paul's Book Arcade, Hamilton; Pictorial Publications, Hastings; and Policeman Publications, Palmerston North.[2]

Bader (1976) describes picture books as being a form of art, hinging "on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page" (1). As we shall see, this description is not always applicable to picture books published in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in regard to the placement of text and illustrations. Often text runs on from page to page without consideration of the impact of page breaks on the story, and illustrations are sometimes placed several pages away from the relevant section of text. Gilderdale also

mentions practical challenges faced by publishers in these years, stating that "locally produced books clearly suffered from wartime shortages and their overall production was dismal" (3). While many books included coloured illustrations, sometimes glossy coloured plates, no books were published in full colour. Some books had mostly black and white line drawings, and some had two-colour illustrations. *The Three Painters* (1943) and *My Father's Farm* (1944) by Aileen Findlay, illustrated by Molly MacAlister, had line drawings only and were marketed as having "pictures to colour" (presumably turning a publishing constraint into a marketing opportunity). Perhaps the most "dismal" example of picture book publishing in this period is *The First Strawberry* by Valerie Spanner (Belvedere Press). This book has only four pages (plus end pages) and is printed on thin newsprint and illustrated with images from rubber stamps.

While the picture books of this period are notable for their diversity in appearance and quality, many are, however, remarkably similar in regard to genre, topic, and style. I discuss some of these commonalities in the following section.

Forest fantasies

Gilderdale describes the first 150 years of New Zealand children's fiction as "overwhelmingly didactic and earnest in intention," eager to inform children about "the Maoris, the settlers, the bush, the native birds, and the hazards of rising tides and fast-swelling rivers" (2). The focus on bush and birds, and to a certain extent, Māori culture, is certainly true of the picture books discussed here, but more often within fantasy stories than realistic fiction, with information about the natural world woven into the adventures of fairies, elves, and anthropomorphised creatures in a New Zealand bush "fairyland." The intention to inform as well as entertain is highlighted by the use of

authors' and publishers' notes that draw attention to the value and accuracy of the text and illustrations.

The inclusion (and promotion) of scientific information within stories of a New Zealand "fairyland" is in fact a long-standing characteristic of New Zealand fiction, as evident in this earnest statement by Mrs Ambrose in the preface to her 1909 book, *New Zealand Fairyland: A Story of the Caves*:

> I have introduced into my story the Tuatara Lizard, as he is generally called, but naturalists affirm that he belongs to the "Crocodile" or "Turtle" family. However, it is sufficient for me to know he belongs to New Zealand, and is interesting from his rarity. The picture shown of him is a true study from Nature. I have also introduced into my story as many different birds as I could, as I wish my various stories to contain birds, flora, lakes, mountains, forests, and everything true to Nature and New Zealand.

In a further example, the publisher's blurb for *Stories of Bird and Bush* (1943) by Olga Burton, a book for older readers, refers to the author's "accurate and faithful description" and states that the illustrations, by Miss L. A. Daff of the Otago University Museum, Dunedin, "were painted under the direction of ornithologists appointed by the Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand." The publishers go on to express the hope that "the excellent work of author and illustrator will foster interest and promote concern for the care and preservation of New Zealand's priceless heritage of glorious forests and delightful bird life."

For younger readers, Nancy Harvey's *Flower Fairies* (1946), a collection of poems, celebrates the plant life in New Zealand's "glorious forests." Harvey's poems are accompanied by detailed botanical drawings by M. Lovell-Hardy that include depictions of the "fairies" associated with each plant.

Many of the picture books I now discuss also use fantasy stories to engage readers while also conveying information about New Zealand bush and birds.

The stories of Richard Bird

The desire to inform the reader about New Zealand's "delightful bird life" is evident in *Richard Bird in the Bush* (1944), written and illustrated by Mollie Miller Atkinson. This is the first of two very popular picture books about an adventurous little sparrow who sets out to explore the bush (where he has "never been before") and find out more about the birds who live there.[3] This positioning of the protagonist as an "outsider" is a relatively common device within New Zealand picture books of this period, allowing for the seeking of information that is then "shared" with the reader. Atkinson's dedication of this first book to "RICHARD, AGE FOUR, WHO CAME FROM ENGLAND" accentuates the fact that both Richard the boy and Richard the bird are learning about the creatures of an unfamiliar environment.

Richard Bird in the Bush is told in rhyme and uses an upper-case typeface that looks handwritten, very similar to the typeface I have selected for the quotations shown here.

> WHEN RICHARD BIRD WAS FOUR YEARS OLD,
> HE FELT SO BIG AND BRAVE AND BOLD
> THAT OFF HE FLEW ONE DAY TO SEE
> THE BUSH; NOT JUST A SINGLE TREE,

BUT ALL THE FOREST GREEN AND GRAND,
WTH MIGHTY TRUNKS ON EITHER HAND
AND FERNS THAT THICKLY CLOTHE THE GROUND
RICHARD FLEW NEAR AND LOOKED AROUND.[4]

The second story about Richard Bird, published in 1947, is equally engaging and, again, earnest in its intention to inform. In *Richard Bird at Sea*, Richard develops an interest in the life of migratory birds and sets off to find out more. This book not only conveys information about sea birds (black-backed gulls, red-legged gulls, shags, herons, and swallows) but also includes black and white scientific drawings along the bottom on every page. The intention to encourage children's interest in nature is made clear in the publisher's note for this book:

> The shells, plants and sea creatures illustrated in this book are all to be found round the New Zealand coasts. Boys and girls who make collections could identify their finds by the drawings, and perhaps colour the drawings from their own specimens.

Winks in Westland (1947)

Winks in Westland, written and illustrated by Ruth Northcroft, reveals a similar mix of fact and fantasy, portraying the bush as fairyland. Subtitled "A Fantasy from the New Zealand Bush," this story features Winks, an eight-year-old girl, who has come from England to stay for a month in Westland. The author's note states:

> The varied wonders of our richest bushland are delightfully woven into this daintily illustrated children's story. You who know and

> love Westland, or any other New Zealand bushland, and you who have not yet penetrated its mysteries, will alike want your children to visit fairyland with Winks.

In this story Winks, an eight-year-old girl, has come from England to stay for a month in Westland. Her newness to New Zealand is established in the opening paragraph:

> WINKS had never before seen the bush. The trees which she knew were the fine old trees of England, the copper beeches, the silver birches, oaks and poplars who changed their dresses with the seasons, tender greens in Spring and burning rust or softest gold in Autumn (5).

The figurative language "changed their dresses," verging on anthropomorphism begins to prepare the reader for the idea of the bush as "fairyland." The author builds on this by describing Winks as "tiny for her eight years" with "fine, golden hair" and "not unlike a small fairy herself" (5).

Northcroft goes on to introduce another magical, indeed, mystical element, a piece of greenstone that Winks has acquired (though we are not told how), worked by ancient Māori:

> Someone had found it here in Wataroa, buried beside an ancient rata tree. Maoris had begun to shape it into an axe, but it had been left unfinished, though much patient work had been done (5-6).

The greenstone serves as an indication that Winks is a special person that the elves and fairies have been waiting for. While Winks is

contemplating the stone, an elf, Rainbow, suddenly appears. Rainbow, explains that many years ago, the Māori who were working on the greenstone ran away from them in fright and the elves and fairies had decided:

> that never again should one of us approach a mortal until the day came when a mortal child, fond of all growing things, of all harmless creeping things, and of all the music-makers of our bush, should come and wish to see the fairies. And here you are! I knew by the Maoris' stone which you carry. That was to be the sign (7).

This sets up the scenario for Winks (and the reader) to learn about the New Zealand bush. Winks is excited about being shown "lots of strange things" (8) but, as it turns out, the book does not fulfil this expectation. The rest of the story is quite dull, interspersing descriptions of fairy life with explanations of obscure botanical phenomena, such as the one reproduced here:

> Once this fungus could live by itself. Now it can only live if it finds a chrysalis from which to take its food. It is its own fault. It was very lazy. Things change their shape, you know. We have seen lots of changes. That lycopodium over there is only a small creeping plant now, but once it was a huge tree-moss and there were great jungles of it. There were no totara trees in those days … (11)

There are brief mentions of glow worms, toadstools, and New Zealand plants but no further reference to the greenstone or to Winks' special role.

The stories of Hutu and Kawa

Probably the best-known New Zealand picture book bush fantasies are the three books, written and illustrated by Avis Acres, about the adventures of the pohutukawa fairies, Hutu and Kawa: *The Adventures of Hutu and Kawa* (1955), *Hutu and Kawa meet Tuatara* (1956), and *Hutu and Kawa Find an Island* (1957). These books combine flower fairy adventures with scientifically accurate depictions of New Zealand bush and coastal settings. In the first book, Hutu and Kawa decide to build a canoe so they can go exploring; in the second book, they help find a new home for Tuatara; and in the third book, they sail to an island and manage to rid it of a possum predator. All three quests create opportunities to provide information about New Zealand flora and fauna.

The books were published by A. H. & A. W. Reed and heavily promoted not only for their charm but for their scientific accuracy. The publisher's blurb for *The Adventures of Hutu and Kawa* states:

> Not only are the stories delightfully told and the illustrations colourful and enchanting, but the birds and flowers have also been portrayed with complete accuracy. In fact, Mrs Acres has had her drawings and stories checked by ornithologists and other authorities to ensure the high standard of authenticity she has set out for her work.

While much of the scientific detail is conveyed in the drawings, factual information is also woven into the text, as in this first mention of Grandpa Kiwi in *The Adventures of Hutu and Kawa*:

> Grandpa Kiwi slept during the day and hunted for food at night. He lay curled up sound

> asleep in his home at the bottom of a hollow tree. His long beak was tucked under his feathers where his wing *should* have been, for poor old Grandpa Kiwi had no wings.

Acres also incorporates descriptions of traditional Māori crafts. When Grandpa Kiwi helps Hutu and Kawa build a canoe, the process of building it is also described in some detail:

> Grandpa Kiwi found a totara branch. First of all they took off all the twigs. Next they began to hollow out the inside. Grandpa Kiwi used his strong beak while Hutu and Kawa worked with tiny greenstone chisels […]
>
> They spent many weeks building the canoe. When they had finished shaping it they rubbed the wood with mussel shells until it was quite smooth.

Unlike the approach in *Winks in Westland*, however, where Māori are acknowledged as practitioners, Acres' fairytale world does not include humans, meaning that Māori traditional crafts (which also include the making of flax kits, feather cloaks, and sails) are attributed instead to the creatures of the forest.

While the Hutu and Kawa books were popular, Holt (2000) states that "sections of the education and publishing worlds were ambivalent toward the mixture of fantastical narrative with accurate illustrations and information." Bohan (2005) comments, rather more bluntly, that "Acres' stories were deemed by many progressive librarians of the 1950s to be dated, sentimental and redolent of English country gardens" (119).

The Adventures of Nimble, Rumble, and Tumble (1950)

There are two books with forest settings that seem free from the earnest intention to inform. *The Adventures of Nimble, Rumble, and Tumble*, written and illustrated by Joan Smith, won the Esther Glen Award in 1950 and, although set in a forest, it is not a New Zealand forest. This book is a lively account, vividly illustrated, of three young animals (a deer, a lion, and a bear) who stray too far into the forest and are chased by Growly the panther. Their parents and the other beasts and birds of the forest come to their rescue and chase the panther to the edge of a lake where, realising he is outnumbered, he jumps into the lake and drowns.

The Little Moa (1954)

Of all the picture books discussed so far, *The Little Moa*, by Kathleen Ross, illustrated by Cherry Earle, seems the most like a modern picture book. This is another anthropomorphic animal story, this time in an early New Zealand setting. The little moa is ridiculed for his very short legs but ends up as a hero after saving the other moa from Māori hunters. His small size enables him to hide himself underwater and bite the chief hunter, making the hunters run away from the "devil" in the swamp.

The Little Moa seems ahead of its time in several ways: its fresh, uncluttered design; its focused storyline (and lack of scientific information); and its inclusion of human characters. In addition to the dramatic and satisfying storyline, there is a close match between text and illustrations with relatively small amounts of text per page. There is also clever use of colour, with most of the illustrations being two-tone but changing to full colour at the climax of the story. *The Little Moa* truly fulfils the potential of "the drama of the turning of the page." Surprisingly, while this book is listed by Gilderdale, she does not include it in her discussion.

Out of the forest

I now discuss some of the picture books with settings other than the forest. These books clearly demonstrate the diversity and, in some cases, quirkiness of picture book publishing in this period.

The Three Painters (1943)

The focus in this book on the work of three tradesmen seems at first an unlikely one for children but this is in fact an engaging and well-constructed tale. Written by Aileen Findlay with "pictures to colour" by Molly MacAlister, it begins with a description of the three painters, Bert, Bill, and Bouncer:

> Bert was President of the Painters' Union. He sat on platforms and said "Ladies and Gentlemen" in a firm voice. He signed minutes and proposed votes of thanks. He believed in things like Compulsory Unionization and Labour Solidarity, and the Importance of Doctrines and such like.
>
> He lived in the suburbs where he had a neat garden. Sometimes he wore a dinner-jacket at functions.
>
> Bill was the Secretary of the Paperhangers' Union. He had a great many black note-books which said Minutes or Accounts or Social Gatherings. He knew how much money to a half-penny the Paperhangers' Union had in its money box.

> He believed in all the same things as Bert – You know about Compulsory Unionization and Labour Solidarity and so on.
>
> He always wore a dinner-jacket on Saturday nights for he was a bachelor and went to lots of parties.

The detail about their trade union affiliations and social habits is not dissimilar to the sort of detail within Margaret Mahy's stories, as in T*he Man Whose Mother was a Pirate* (1972).

> The little man had a brown suit with black buttons, and a brown tie and shiny shoes – all most respectable and handsome. He worked in a neat office and wrote down rows of figures in books, and ruled lines under them.

Another similarity is Findlay's use of multi-syllabic, mysterious sounding words such as "Compulsory Unionization" and "Labour Solidarity" (reminiscent of Mahy's use of words such as "discombobulous" and "rumbustification.")[5]

The story moves on to a description of the painters' truck and their equipment, including one can of royal purple paint:

> And tucked right under all the other cans was one really small one marked "Royal Purple." The Three Painters kept it just in case someone should decide to have a Royal Purple door or window, or even a doorknob or letterbox.
>
> But so far no one had!

The reader's expectation that the Royal Purple paint is going to be used at last is fully realised in this story. The three painters are hired

to paint the house of the Smith family, including the playhouse that belongs to Belinda Ann Smith. They run out of paint with just the playhouse door left to do, and, of course, the Royal Purple paint turns out to be just what they need.

The Adventures of Matchbox Max (1944)

The content, the design, and the inclusion of ideas for construction activities make *Matchbox Max* by A. W. Reed one of the more intriguing books published in these years. The protagonist is indeed a matchbox (anthropomorphised) and the cartoon-like illustrations explore the humorous possibilities of how a matchbox might live. When Max puts on his hat to go out, the illustration shows that he only needs to add a brim (a ring around his head) because his "match" head is already the shape of the crown of a hat. When Max crashes his cart while on a drive in the countryside, he is patched up by a friendly miller with flour and water paste. Subsequent illustrations show a crisscross patch pasted onto Max's back. The story culminates in a confrontation with a celluloid giant who is vanquished, quite literally, in a puff of smoke when Max takes a match "out of his inside pocket" and rubs the head of the match "along his side." Max rescues Vespa, a female match who has been held captive in the castle by the celluloid giant. The story ends happily ever after with Max and Vespa getting married and producing baby matches, who are shown tucked up neatly in a matchbox cradle.

Matchbox Max takes the dynamic and engaging interplay of illustration and text to a new level with the inclusion of several pages of diagrams and instructions at the end, showing how to make the items mentioned in the story, such as the furniture, the cart, the mill, a bridge, and the castle. Almost tucked away in a bottom corner of one page is a note to the reader (complete with a "signpost") stating

that “THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN FOR SELWYN, BECAUSE OF THE FUN WE HAD WITH MATCHBOXES” and signed “DAD – HIS MARK” (a big bold “X”).

The North Bound Express (1944)

This story by Aileen Findlay and Rona Dyer, describes the experiences of two engines pulling the North Bound Express to its city terminus (not named in the book but presumably Auckland). The engines talk to each other as they race along. Nothing untoward happens but the engines are exuberant, and we see aspects of the New Zealand countryside (the sea, farmlands) as they pass, along with a stop at the Refreshment Rooms where the passengers eat “sandwiches and meat pies and raisin buns” and drink “hot tea out of thick yellow cups.”

My Father’s Farm (1944)

Like so many of the picture books published in these years, this book by Aileen Findlay, illustrated by Molly Macalister, combines elements of fiction and non-fiction. Narrated by a child, Peter, it is also one of the few books, that reveals any insights into everyday New Zealand life. Peter’s description of a typical day on the farm is extremely detailed but the flow of information is lightened in several ways: the book has a highly patterned text structure, with each page ending with a variation of the same refrain (“We all live together on my father’s farm in the country,” “We all help each other on my father’s farm in the country,” and so on); it has many illustrations, with each double spread featuring a full-page illustration; and the book includes a song for readers (“Up was I on my father’s farm on a sunny morning early, Feeding of my father’s cows on a sunny morning early”).

Toddie's Farm Picture Book (1947)

This book comprises photographs (by Iris Craw) accompanied by captions written by L. Buick-Constable. As with *My Father's Farm*, this book might be considered as non-fiction except that the short sections of text that accompany each photograph create a sense of narrative as Toddie goes for a walk around the farm to "help the animals with their breakfasts." His farm tour concludes with a return to his house for "hot scones and warm fresh milk."

The Rabbit who Wouldn't Recite (1949)

This odd little story by Alice C. Hall has only fifteen pages but is interesting in its humour (conveyed both through Hall's text and entertaining illustrations by Neville Lodge) and in having a protagonist (a young rabbit) who successfully challenges adult authority.

Robbie has "beautiful big ears" that, when he wiggles them, make "his brothers and sisters and cousins and uncles and aunts" gaze at him in wonder. When he starts school, he is also found to have a talent for recitation. His mother arranges for his Uncle Francis to come and see what Robbie can do, with a view to starting him off on a career in show business, but Robbie refuses to cooperate. The concluding comments in the book are an odd mix of congratulating Robbie on his independence in standing his ground and at the same time emphasising his dependence on his family:

> Robbie, you see, did not want to go away from home. He was only a little rabbit, but he had feelings like little girls and boys and he loved his home, his Mummy and Daddy and his family. (And just between you and me, Mummy

Rabbit was pleased that her little son did not have to go away from her.)

Despite the apparent contradiction here, this book is unique among all the books discussed here in the agency it gives to Robbie. It also stands out for its sense of fun.

Opo, the Gay Dolphin (1956)

Both this book and the next are both fictional accounts of actual events in New Zealand history, further demonstrating the "earnest" intention to convey information to children. *Opo* is based on the true story of a friendly dolphin who mesmerised and delighted people in the seaside town of Oponini for ten months in 1955-56. Sadly Opo came to a sudden and mysterious end, with her body being found on some rocks.[6] Most events are related from the viewpoint of the dolphin but Acres also includes two child characters, siblings David and Wendy, whose roles as observers enable Acres to convey information about Opo's disappearance. Acres avoids explicit reference to the death of the dolphin by having Opo "speak" to David in a dream, reassuring him that although she is no longer around, all is well.

Jimmy and the Bridge (1959)

The construction of the Auckland Harbour Bridge (opened in the same year that the book was published) is the focus of this book by Kenneth Saunders, illustrated by Clive Luscombe. It opens with a description of the harbour setting, why the bridge was needed, and some of the debate about it, then begins to describe the process of building the bridge. At this point the story switches from fact to fiction (and anthropomorphism). A problem arises when Bobby the Bulldozer is unable to excavate close to a power pylon. A child, Johnny, who has been watching Bobby at work, mentions that his

grandpa had told him about how he used to make roads using “a scraper pulled by horses or bullocks.” This idea is taken up and the bridge building team bring Jimmy, a cart-horse, out of retirement. Everything works out well, the bridge is completed, and Jimmy is made part of the opening ceremony. In contrast, Johnny’s role is minimised; he is not acknowledged for his idea and, in fact, there is a somewhat ironic implication that the bridge building team are taking the credit instead:

> The Foreman looked pleased because he had found a good horse.
>
> The overseer looked pleased because he had thought the plan to use a horse might work.
>
> The Supervisor of Works looked pleased because he had thought it was a good idea.
>
> Johhny was pleased because he had told them about his grandpa.

In some respects, this is an engaging and informative story, but paradoxically, the aspects that seem to have been added in order to create appeal for child readers (Johnny’s role in suggesting the use of a horse, and the anthropomorphism of the bulldozer and horse) serve only to confuse. The marginalisation of a child character in a book meant for children seems inappropriate, and the anthropomorphism of the horse is taken too far. Not only does Jimmy talk but he has a nightmare about being chased by angry bulldozers (perhaps an attempt by the author to make something of the potential conflict between old and new technology) which takes up three pages and distracts from the main storyline.

The Three Brown Bears and the Manpower Man (1945)

This book, written by Margery Dunningham, illustrated by Anne McCahon provides further evidence of the diversity within children's publishing in this period. In fact, if not included by Gilderdale in *A Sea change*, I would have omitted this book from my discussion as not fitting my criterion of being intended for children. Gilderdale categorises this book as being for "under-sevens" (211) and describes it as "a charming story" with "amusing pictures" (213) whereas I feel that Dunningham uses picture book conventions to create a satirical political statement for adults. The title is clearly meant to evoke the traditional tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears; the language is childlike and repetitive and laid out in short lines without punctuation; and there are illustrations on every double-page spread. Yet the storyline lacks focus, and the character likely to be of most interest to children, the smallest bear, plays no part in events.

In this story, the Manpower Man tells the three brown bears, Bruno, Juno, and Jonathan (the "baby bear") they have to leave their home and move to Wellington. The bears travel by train but are told by a guard, "This is a FIRST CLASS CARRIAGE. You can't stay here. No bears allowed." They move into a second-class carriage, where the same thing happens, and then into a guard's van where the guard looks at them "very sternly," takes out "a shiny black note book" and refers to regulations that state that the bears "ought to be out in the cattle truck along with the sheep and the calves." The guard, however, decides to let them stay where they are. The implications in regard to social (and perhaps even, racial) discrimination within this series of setbacks seem astonishingly inappropriate in a book for children.

When the bears arrive in Wellington, the Manpower Man, who up to this point might be considered the villain of the story, gives them breakfast and then takes Bruno to work while Juno and Jonathan go house-hunting. At this point the story seems to become a comment on housing shortages, with the bears noticing many other people walking round and looking for somewhere to live:

> There were Mummies and Daddies
>
> and little boys
>
> and little girls
>
> and babies in the perambulators
>
> and sometimes it rained
>
> and the Mummies and Daddies
>
> and the little babies in the perambulators
>
> all got wet through
>
> But they couldn't find anywhere
>
> to live at all.

At last, the bears find a captain of a boat who is happy for them to live on board. All the other house hunters then decide that living on boats is a good idea, and the story ends with the comment “And that’s how all the people in Wellington found somewhere to live.” The combination of childlike language and book design with such a baffling storyline suggests to me that the intention of the author is to highlight bureaucratic mismanagement of employment and housing rather than a genuine attempt to entertain children.

How are New Zealand children and lifestyles portrayed in New Zealand picture books of the 1940s and 1950s?

The picture books published in these years are a mix of fantasy and realism. In general, the settings are realistic, but the protagonists are not, meaning that there are few glimpses within the books into New Zealand lifestyles. The more realistic stories involve settings on farms, a city (Auckland), and a beach (Opononi), while *The North Bound Express* provides a brief insight into New Zealand rail travel.

Very few of the books portray New Zealand children.[7] Where children do appear, they tend to be minor characters, or, as in *Toddie's Farm*, *My Father's Farm*, and *Opo the Gay Dolphin*, devices to convey information. The stories show almost no interaction between children and other people, even family members, meaning few insights into character, relationships, or lifestyles (other than the routine of life on Peter's father's farm). Ironically, one of the few authentic portrayals of a child's behaviour occurs in the fantasy story, *Winks in Westland,* when Winks does "skids" on the gravel drive on her bike:

> It was only a little while since someone had shown her how to do "skids" and she practiced it every day. To do "skids" she pedalled at full speed and then suddenly put on the brakes. This churned up the stones with loud scrunching and made great bold slashes in the ground (29).

It is possible, however, if we consider the overall features of the books (format and design as well as content) to draw some conclusions about attitudes to children, including children as readers.

Gilderdale is disparaging about children's fiction of the 1940s, describing it as "didactically self-conscious and condescending" (3). Certainly, many of the picture books convey a somewhat overwhelming sense of concern, often sliding into didacticism, about children needing to be guided and instructed, particularly about the natural world of New Zealand. Gilderdale also finds that in New Zealand children's fiction prior to 1982, "there is little evidence of attention to characterisation or style and very few authors have been concerned with sharing humour and having fun with children" (2).

There is certainly evidence of condescension, with most of the picture books emphasising the gap between children and adults. Many books have a large amount of text, suggesting books designed for adults to read to children rather than for children to read for themselves. Author notes and publisher blurbs addressed to adults also convey this expectation and, when addressed to children, often have a condescending tone, as in this letter, printed on the back cover of *Jimmy and the Bridge*:

> Dear Children
>
> This story about Jimmy is true. There is a bridge across the Auckland Harbour and there is a horse named Jimmy. However, just as the grown-ups do in their books, we must say that "any similarity between persons mentioned in this book and persons living or dead is purely coincidental." Ask Mother or Father what that big word means!

The gap between children and adults is further emphasised through references to the small size of child characters (human or otherwise). Johnny in *Jimmy and the Bridge* is referred to as a "little

boy" and "Little Johnny;" Hutu and Kawa are "two tiny Pohutukawa Babies;" Nimble, Rumble, and Tumble are "baby animals," and so on. Some stories centre around the idea of the "little" protagonist overreaching themselves and needing to be rescued or to find their way back to the safety of home. Nimble and Rumble disregard the warning of their parents not to go too far into the forest and need to be rescued from Growly the panther. In *Richard Bird at Sea,* Richard's mother discourages his adventurous spirit and his interest in migratory birds, telling him, that "we [sparrows] are content to stay in the country we are born in." When Richard persists in his intention, he is faced with danger after disturbing a colony of nesting swallows and his thoughts turn to home:

> Richard thought of his mother and his cosy home, and he thought of the cold bleak island with the angry sea swallows guarding their nursery […] and suddenly he seemed to hear voices speaking inside him.
>
> "Home … Home … Home …" the voices whispered, "you should never have left it, Richard … you are not a migratory bird. Home … Home … Home …"[8]

Similarly, Robbie, the rabbit who wouldn't recite, chooses to stay home with his family rather than move to the city with his uncle.

The books also imply the importance of social order and assigned roles including gender roles. Male characters, often adults, dominate the stories. Of the stories discussed in this paper, only *Winks in Westland* and *Opo the Gay Dolphin* have female protagonists. In the few books where women appear, they are shown in domestic roles, caring for children, wearing aprons, knitting, cooking, cleaning, and

darning socks. This division of roles is most evident in Peter's description of family life in *My Father's Farm.* Father is undoubtedly the head of the family (and the owner of the farm) and each family member has their set tasks: Father milks the cows, ploughs, has tea, reads "his" newspaper, and in the evening, reads adventure stories to his sons; Mother helps Father on the farm, makes school lunches, cooks and cleans (Peter says, "My mother has been cooking and cleaning and washing all day. She is a very good cook. She won a prize for her cake at the Show") and darns socks; each of the three boys has specific tasks – they help milk the cows, feed the animals, wash the dishes, check the mail box, and work in the garden.

This book, however, along with *The Adventures of Matchbox Max* are the only two that include examples of recreational interactions between children and parents (in this case, fathers and sons), although in the latter book the reference is an appendix rather than part of the main narrative.

Overall, the books indicate an earnest intention to help children develop as good New Zealand citizens, to appreciate the natural world of New Zealand, conform to social expectations – and not to be too adventurous. The portrayal of children in the stories aligns closely with a 1956 statement by Arnold Campbell, chief inspector of primary schools, about the aspirations of the Department of Education for New Zealand children:

> We want children to be healthy and physically vigorous, and, if possible, happy; to live their lives fully and significantly as children; and to grow up into men and women who are generous, self-disciplined, and emotionally stable, willing to shoulder their responsibilities and

> equipped to do so […] interesting as persons, mentally alert, clear-headed, and with an effective grasp of the tools of learning, and some understanding of their natural and social worlds. They should have creative interests of some kind, and good, if simple standards of taste. We want them also to have a firm appreciation of the values of their society.[9]

What is the relationship between New Zealand picture books of the 1940s and 1950s and the books that were published in the 1963 Ready to Read series?

Both the 1940s and 1950s picture books and the 1963 Ready to Read books show a commitment to New Zealand content, but the outcomes are very different. While the picture books embrace fantasy, interwoven with information about New Zealand bush and birds, the Ready to Read stories embrace realism. Children are central characters, and most of the stories are about children's everyday lives at home and school. Many of them are based on teachers' recounts of actual school experiences (Hancock, 44).[10]

As might be expected in a national reading series, the Ready to Read stories portray a more representative picture of New Zealand society than in the picture books, featuring both Māori and Pākeha children. (It must be acknowledged, however, that there is little that is culturally specific about the portrayal of the Māori children in these stories.) The picture books include only one, very brief, mention of a Māori child. This occurs in in *Opo the Gay Dolphin* when a Māori boy dives into the water to try and take away a bottle that Opo has been playing with.[11]

The stories in the Ready to Read series are lively and humorous, with children shown to be independent and resourceful, often initiators of events. Some stories finish at a climactic point (inviting readers to imagine what might happen next) and the illustrations often include entertaining details. In contrast, as noted by Gilderdale, the picture books (with only a few exceptions such as *The Adventures of Matchbox Max* and *The Rabbit who Wouldn't Recite*) are more earnest, lacking humour and a sense of fun.

The Ready to Read stories do, however, convey the same definition of gender roles as in the picture books, reflective of social attitudes of the period. Mothers are commonly portrayed carrying out domestic tasks:

> They keep the households running smoothly, provide meals, care for the children, take them to school, and go shopping, while fathers go out to work and show their children how to build rafts, go fishing, and put up tents (Hancock, 96).

Some stories also exhibit the "earnest intention" (verging on didacticism) to convey information about the natural world of New Zealand. There are six camping stories set in the bush that include several episodes that seem intended to inform readers of the wonders of the natural world of New Zealand. Examples include an episode in "The Christmas Tree" (in the miscellany *The Sweet Porridge*) where parents instruct their children about New Zealand native plants, and, in "Sliding and Flying" (in the miscellany of the same name) a three-page description about preparing and eating pipi.[12] There is also use of the "outsider" perspective (as in the Richard Bird

stories and *Winks in Westland*) in "The River Picnic" (in *The Stars in the Sky*) where a visitor from England is introduced to the wonders of the New Zealand outdoors lifestyle.[13]

While there is a similar sense that adults know best, with several stories ending with an adult comment on the actions of the child characters, for the most part, the Ready to Read stories avoid the condescension evident within several of the 1940s and 1950s picture books. Perhaps this was due in part to the Ready to Read books being trialled in schools before publication to ensure that they appealed to children. The avoidance of condescension was a specific concern of the School Publications Branch. In the introduction to a UNESCO report (Wells 1957) Clarence Beeby, Director of Education 1940-60, wrote:

> In a school book a small child from a barren home may make his first contact with literature and the arts, and his first contact, too, with minds that are trying to say something to him with sincerity and skill and with no hint of condescension. No effort of ours can be too great if we are to meet the test. (7)

The purpose of the 1963 Ready to Read series was to help young children learn to read. Fortuitously, many of the aspects of instructional design in the 1963 materials (now common features of picture books) also added appeal and literary impact. At the earliest levels of the series (the books for beginning readers), each double spread consists of one page of text with an illustration on the facing page, providing opportunities for "the simultaneous display of two facing pages" and "the drama of the turning of the page" (Bader 1) that is

missing from many of the picture books. All the Ready to Read stories are told in prose rather than verse and contain a high proportion of dialogue, which as well as being a useful device for moving the narrative along without the need for explanation, adds opportunities for drama and characterisation.

It is interesting to note that no New Zealand picture books are mentioned in *Suggestions for Teaching Reading in Infant Classes*, the Ready to Read handbook, written by Myrtle Simpson, the series editor. Simpson recommends that teachers make available "easy picture and story books" to "increase the children's confidence and independence" in reading (40). She describes such books as having "good illustrations and easy repetitive texts" and being "easy enough for children to handle and read to themselves … after they have looked at and discussed the pictures, and sometimes joined in as the teacher has read the text with them" (29). Clearly, none of the picture books, except perhaps for *The Little Moa*, meet these criteria, confirming the differences in thinking about children as readers between these two sets of materials.

In conclusion

While many of the 1940s and 1950s New Zealand picture books can be described as didactic (and some as dismal), several stand out for their ability to delight readers. The stories of Richard Bird and Hutu and Kawa, popular in their time, remain relatively well-known today, with the books by Acres still being republished (most recently in 2015). While other, equally delightful books such as *The Adventures of Matchbox Max* and *The Little Moa* have not stood the test of time, aspects such as their innovative design, and in the case of *Matchbox Max*, quirky humour, are now picture book conventions.

While the picture books of the 1940s and 1950s describe and celebrate the natural world of New Zealand, they virtually ignore the real, everyday worlds of New Zealand children. Within this literary context, the 1963 Ready to Read series with its focus on realism and humour can be seen to have filled a significant gap in the reading lives of young New Zealanders.

Notes

[1.] Digitised copies of many of the books from the 1963 Ready to Read series can be found at https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-corpus-readytoread.html

[2.] In an interesting aside, Policeman Publications published the "Life in New Zealand series edited by L.M. Buick-Constable and had the humorous tagline "BOOKS BOUND TO ARREST YOUR ATTENTION!"

[3.] Digitised copies of the Richard Bird books can be found in the International Children's Digital Library http://www.childrenslibrary.org/

[4.] Page numbers are rare in the 1940s and 1950s picture books. All quotations from children's books in this paper, other than from *Winks in Westland*, are from unpaged books.

[5.] In *Mrs Discombobulous* (1969) and *The Great Piratical Rumbustification* and *The Librarian and the Robbers* (1978).

[6.] There is information about Opo at https://teara.govt.nz/en/photograph/4700/the-story-of-opo

[7.] Ironically, the New Zealand picture book that most clearly portrays the everyday lives of children, *The Adventures of Biscotti and*

Caramelle (1951), by William Anso, Illustrated by Molly MacAlister, is set overseas “in a land like Italy” (5).

[8.] This section of text provides an extreme example of the lack of attention to editing in an otherwise well-constructed book. The impact of this climactic message from Richard’s “voices” is badly affected by having a page break after the word “migratory” (i.e. “… you are not a migratory [page break] bird …”).

[9.] This statement is included in *The Development of the New Zealand Curriculum* (1970) by John Ewing.

[10.] The Ready to Read stories for the youngest readers were composed by an editorial team within the School Publications Branch. The stories for older readers were by individual authors.

[11.] There are two further references to Māori in the picture books, in *Winks in Westland* and *The Little Moa*, but both involve adult Māori in the distant past.

[12.] These stories are by Helen A. Cutten, illustrated by Ian Jackson.

[13.] “The River Picnic” (1963) is by C. Hooker, illustrated by William Stobbs.

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