

Marcie Muir 1919–2007

Fifty years ago Australian children's books were almost totally neglected. Whilst people had heard of Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding*, the works of May Gibbs and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* and Mary Grant Bruce's Billabong books, they seemed rather old-fashioned and were yet to be recognised as enduring classics that helped to shape our culture. It was at this time, in the mid-1950s, that Marcie Muir became interested in the subject of Australian children's books and set out, as a first step, to discover exactly what had been written for children by Australians or set in Australia. Neither she nor anyone else had any idea of the scale of the task she was undertaking. For the next dozen years she searched for Australian children's books in libraries and bookshops, and with the help of private collectors carefully recorded the details of every edition of every different title. They ranged from children's versions of the voyages of early explorers such as Captain Cook and Matthew Flinders, through the first simple books published for children in Australia, to the over-the-top boys' adventure stories of late Victorian and Edwardian times and enduring favourites such as *Cole's Funny Picture Book*, right up to the new wave of Australian children's books beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s with authors such as Colin Thiele, Patricia Wrightson, Nan Chauncy and Max Fatchen. In 1970 the first volume of Marcie Muir's *A Bibliography of Australian Children's Books* was published. It was a handsome volume of more than 1,000 pages, well illustrated, and giving a detailed description of more than 5,000 books published up to the end of 1967. Its publication naturally brought many other neglected books to light, and it was followed in 1976 by a second volume. This filled the gaps and included books published between 1968 and the end of 1972.

Impressed by the high quality of the illustrations in many of the children's books Marcie wrote a scholarly *History of Australian Children's Book Illustration*, which was published by Oxford University Press in 1982, and went on to make close studies of the work of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite (*The Fairy World of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite*, with Robert Holden) in 1985, and of Sheila Hawkins (*Sheila Hawkins: Profile of an Illustrator*) in 1998. Her other books included *My Bush Book* (1982), a life of K. Langloh Parker, who had published the first collections of Australian aboriginal legends in the 1890s, and an anthology of South Australian poetry and prose for children, *Under the Pepper Trees* (1987), which was published as part of the state's Jubilee celebrations. Marcie is also known for a fine piece of literary detective work in which she discovered the identity of the anonymous author of the first children's book published in Australia: *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* (Sydney, 1841). The discovery was published in a little pamphlet in 1980: *Charlotte Barton: Australia's First Children's Author*.

Marcie Collett was born in Perth on 5 March 1919, but the family moved to Adelaide in 1925 and she was educated at Girton School. The Great Depression



Marcie and her dog Fanny in the mid-1980s.

and her mother's illness thwarted her desire to go to university, but she studied Italian and German at the Workers' Educational Association and was employed as an Italian translator in the Censorship Bureau during the Second World War. In 1947 she married Harry Muir, the proprietor of the Beck Book Company, a business that sold both new and second-hand books. Harry had a keen interest in private presses, book design and bookplates, as well as Australian literature and history. He set up the original Wakefield Press as a small adjunct to his business and published Marcie's first book, *Anthony Trollope in Australia*, in 1949, while she wrote a short history of the press for the South Australian Book Collectors Society in 1993 (*The Wakefield Press 1942-1978*).

Marcie worked in the Beck Book Company shop until 1956, when the first of her two children was born, and for the next twenty years she skilfully balanced the demands of a happy family life, her research, maintaining an interest in the book trade, and her garden. After Harry retired, closing the business, in 1978 Marcie was at last able to indulge her long-restrained love of travel, with many trips to Britain and Europe, including much successful book hunting.

In 1986, when Halley's comet was in the sky, she decided to undertake a complete revision of the whole bibliography. This took five years to complete, and the result, which now ran to almost 9,000 items, was published in 1992 by Melbourne University Press as *Australian Children's Books: A Bibliography. Volume One, 1774-1972*.

At the same time a separate volume by Kerry White covered the books published between 1973 and 1988. The extraordinary success of Australian children's books in the era of Kerry Argent's *One Woolly Wombat* (1982) and Mem Fox's *Possum Magic* (1984) is reflected in the fact that this second volume, covering only fifteen years, was as large as the first. In 1978 Marcie and Harry Muir were jointly awarded the National Book Council's Bookman of the Year Award; in 1984 she received the inaugural Nan Chauncy Award from the Children's Book Council and in 1988 the Library Association of Australia's Redmond Barry Award.

Marcie was a long-standing member of the BSANZ. She gave a paper at the 2001 conference on "The History of Prince Lee Boo" which was published in 2003 (in *The Making and Keeping of Books*, ed. Ray Choate, special issue, *BSANZ Bulletin* 27.1–2 (2003), 83–91). She also attended and gave papers at several of the History of the Book in Australia conferences and had a keen interest in the history of publishing and bookselling in Australia as well as Australian children's books.

Marcie passed away on 17 November 2007. She is survived by her daughter Kathie Muir, a senior lecturer in Gender, Work and Social Inquiry at the University of Adelaide, and Rory Muir, the author of several works on Britain and the Napoleonic Wars.

*Rory Muir,
Adelaide*