

The use of images to explore the Indigenous experience of conflict in Australian Children's Picture Books

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Australian children's picture book authors and illustrators who choose armed conflict as their subject matter inevitably grapple with the paradox that while war is a central component of national identity, the experience of Indigenous peoples remains, at best, underrepresented. This article uses the Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual metafunctions developed by Clare Painter et al. to compare how the Indigenous experience of conflict is represented in the Australian children's picture books *Alfred's war* (Bin Salleh and Fry) and *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* (Uhr and O'Halloran).

Keywords: Aboriginal resistance; Aboriginal soldiers; Australian New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC); Frontier Wars; images; Indigenous; picture books; war

Context

As Michael Howard observes, “it is hard to think of any nation-state ... which was not created, and had its boundaries defined, by wars, by internal violence, or by a combination of the two” (39). Australia is no exception, for foreign wars are a central component of an inviolable foundation story that emphasizes the role of Australian military engagements in shaping the nation (McKenna). After the landing on Gallipoli in 1915 the soldier archetype became the living embodiment of a new and vigorous white race strengthened by frontier life and marked by qualities such as courage, loyalty, and mateship. Australian children’s picturebook authors and illustrators who choose armed conflict as their subject matter inevitably grapple with the paradox that while war is a central component of national identity, the experience of Indigenous peoples remains, at best, underrepresented. This article will compare *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* (Uhr & O’Halloran, 2019) and *Alfred’s war* (Bin Salleh & Fry, 2018) to explore the use of war time trauma and the landscape of the battlefield as a framework to challenge the pervasive euro-centric approach evident in war themed picture books. Although both books offer an important corrective to this hegemonic narrative, they avoid making too radical a challenge to the reverential tone of Australian war commemoration. This is significant given that picturebooks are often a child’s first exposure to literature and play a significant role in shaping attitudes and values (Kerby et al; Macdonald and Macdonald).

Despite an increasingly nuanced approach to understanding Australian history, there is still a widespread characterisation of it as a grand narrative dominated by foreign wars and the central role played by the Anzac spirit in shaping the nation (Lake, 2010). What emerges from this national obsession is an “inviolable foundation story” (McKenna 153), an officially sanctioned version of history (Bedford et al.; Kerby et al., a, b, c) that emphasises the “forging of a modern nation through sacrifice and the emergence of a masculine Australian identity” (Ashton and Hamilton 19). Not all conflicts, however, sit easily within this paradigm, most notably the wars fought on the Australia frontier that ended in the dispossession of Australia’s Indigenous population. Between 1788 and 1928 22,000 men women and children, 20,000 of them Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, were killed either in official or non-official actions. It was “one of the few significant wars in Australian history and arguably the single most important one” (Reynolds 248). Material held in archives in major cultural institutions in Australia and Great Britain and oral histories in Indigenous communities describe, often with a “disturbing candour ... violence [which] was very widespread, well-orchestrated and committed continent-wide from occupation until far into the 20th century” (Daley).

Alfred’s War and Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain

Alfred’s war tells the story of a fictional First World War soldier who is one of the 1000 Indigenous Australians who managed to circumvent restrictive enlistment policies. Though many found military service, both then and in later conflicts, an “egalitarian experience,” on their return to Australia “most were denied veterans benefits, continued to live under restrictive protection acts and confronted prejudice” (Riseman 3). Rachel Bin Salleh and Samantha Fry confront an event and a literary tradition not to be trifled with, let alone disparaged. As Stephen

Garton observes, the Anzac myth exerts an artistic tyranny over Australian war memorial design; one can just as easily draw the same conclusion about its control over children's picture books. Bin Salleh and Fry avoid radically challenging the mythology and instead seek admission to it on behalf of Indigenous servicemen and women. They are, however, clearly aware of the egregious flaws in the style of Australian Great War literature, one which is "anchored in a determination to posit the sacrifice as worthwhile, and to make the war serve as a foundation story for the nation" (Rhoden). Nevertheless, any attempt to link the Indigenous struggle against European settlement and military service after 1901 is, in Padraic Gibson view, "fundamentally mistaken. There is a real danger of the proud tradition of Aboriginal resistance to British invasion being used to bolster the militaristic, nationalist ideology being carefully cultivated through the ANZAC centenary" (66).

Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain (Uhr) tells the story of an Indigenous guerrilla leader of the Jagerra nation who in 1843 united warriors from across several different groups to win a victory at the Battle of Meewah, located on the present-day outskirts of the Queensland regional city of Toowoomba. This victory and the skirmishes associated with it challenge the widespread perception that Indigenous peoples were passive victims of colonial expansion. Their victory, which slowed rather than halted their dispossession, constituted the first major setback to white settlement in Queensland (Kerkhove and Uhr). It also provided evidence of an organised and sophisticated resistance strategy (Kerkhove) which often "had all the hallmarks of guerrilla warfare: raiding, retreating, and engaging the enemy when in a superior situation" (Gapps 5). The popular discourse, where "the vigour of Aboriginal resistance [is] forgotten ... Tribesmen and women [are] pitied rather than respected" (Reynolds 14), nevertheless remains firmly entrenched.

The author Bin Salleh is descended from the Nimunburr and Yawuru peoples of the Kimberley region of Western Australia and the illustrator Samantha Fry is descended from the Dagiman people from Katherine in the Northern Territory. The author Uhr and illustrator O'Halloran are white Australians; in fact, one of Uhr's ancestors was speared to death during the Frontier Wars. Each creative team therefore acts as a "foreign observer" faced with a choice either to "go native" or maintain a "broker's distance", though the choice is rarely as clear cut as this suggests (Barreyre et al.). Although both teams in effect native (though as a pejorative term, its use in this context is problematic), they are still clearly influenced by the expectations of the picture book genre, their exposure to a pervasive construct that positions the soldier as a national archetype, and in the case of Bin Salleh and Fry, the knowledge that the wider military traditions of white Australia include a sustained assault on their ancestors.

Reading Picture Books

The discussion of the images in these picture books is informed by Clare Painter et al.'s *Reading Visual Narratives*, which extends on the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen who argued that like language, visual images can make meaning. Painter et al. posit that images "have even more fluid categories than does language" (10), an important consideration given that picture books usually include both text and images. The text has three fundamental purposes or metafunctions, which operate simultaneously: the text must be about something (ideational), it must enable "communicative interaction with others" (interpersonal), and it must make sense in "being relevant to previous utterances or to a shared situation" (textual) (Painter et al. 7).

Each of the three metafunctions includes choices that can be used to analyse the use of language and images in children’s picture books. These are depicted through ‘system networks’ which are used to represent the choices that have been made. Each of these systems which are usually depicted in small capitals consists of several opposing choices that can be made such as ‘sad’ or ‘happy’ when talking about the mood of a character for example.

Table 1: Analytical approach to visual images by Kress and van Leeuwen extended by Painter et al.

	Ideational (Representation)	Interpersonal (Interaction and Modality)	Textual (Composition)
Kress & van Leeuwen	Codification of ideological positioning: Narrative – vectors (depiction of action or movement); conceptual – static (pause or reflective moment).	Social distance (size of frame, close-up etc.): Involvement and Power; Contact and Modality	Spatial disposition and display of images: Information (value, salience, framing)
Painter et al.	Participants: Character manifestation, Character appearance and Character relations; Processes: Inter-event relations; and Inter-circumstances.	Focalization: Pathos and Affect; Ambience (vibrancy, warmth, familiarity) and Graduation.	Intermodal Integration: Layout; Framing and Focus.

The Ideational (Representational) metafunction considers how the images represent the relationships between the characters which can also include conceptual representations. Characters are often identified in picturebooks by their clothing or accessories. This enables them to reappear at different times and interact with other characters yet still be identifiable. The ideational content of pictures, however, is not always obvious, particularly when “symbolic attributes” (Kress & van Leeuwen 105) are included to encourage reflection by the reader. Using the system of CHARACTER MANIFESTATION, a character can be represented as a complete figure or represented by a part of their body or through a shadow or silhouette. CHARACTER APPEARANCE explains how characters can appear in their first depiction in the story and later reappear in the next image or later in the story. CHARACTER RELATIONS describes how characters are linked by similar attributes such as size or similar clothing. Relationships between characters are represented through the system INTER-EVENT RELATIONS.

The Interpersonal (Interaction & Modality) metafunction refers to the relationship between the reader and author/artist and the characters themselves. This is linked to the system of FOCALISATION and can be depicted as encouraging the reader to engage with the character such as through direct eye contact. The system of PATHOS includes how the illustrator has depicted the characters with styles ranging from a minimal line drawing through to a very realistic and naturalistic style. The system of AMBIENCE describes the emotional effect of the images on the viewer and the creation of atmosphere or mood.

The Textual (Composition) metafunction considers how interactive and representational elements in the picturebooks relate to one another and are integrated in a meaningful way which is depicted through the system INTERMODAL INTEGRATION. Other systems can include FRAMING which considers in greater detail how an image is positioned on a page. The way different visual elements are positioned to attract the reader’s attention is encompassed in the system of FOCUS.

Methods

The following section will utilise the three metafunctions to analyse how the images are used in *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* and *Alfred's War* and to explore how the authors and illustrators have depicted the Indigenous experience of conflict. This analysis was undertaken using the three metafunctions proposed by Painter et al. with a particular focus on images which can “reveal new and sometimes ignored meanings” (Zohrabi et al. 40). Leavy argues that writers and artists try to persuade readers and viewers to “see the world through our eyes” which may provide an important opportunity for Indigenous writers and artists to provide unique perspectives for non-Indigenous readers and viewers (19). Kress and van Leeuwen contend that visual language is not universally understood but is “culturally specific”, which is particularly significant for the exploration of Indigenous topics in children’s picture books (4). The discussion will also include how design elements and principles have been used to create further meaning. In the following analysis text from both books have been include where relevant in the analysis of the images and is depicted by inverted commas.

Analysis of the Three Metafunctions in *Alfred's War* and *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain*

Although the three metafunctions provide important insights into the choices made by the authors, artists and the potential meaning, reading is a complex process; what a maker intends is often interpreted differently by different audiences in quite surprising ways (Duncum). For example, as Kerby and Baguley reveal, Australian war themed picture books of all types focus on the battlefield and the challenge of “depicting a surreally empty landscape” (103). *Alfred's War*, however, provides only one image which explicitly references this view (Spread 9). Throughout the rest of the book, Alfred can only draw comfort from the Australian landscape; although he “had fought in the Great War ... his bravery was not a part of the nation’s remembering. He was one of the forgotten soldiers” (Spread 15). The illustrator Fry also refers to this sense of loss describing how her people’s fractured history has resulted in something “missing in my art now ... my history has been forgotten ... There’s no one to pass it to me.”

In contrast, *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* does not present the battlefield as a “dystopian wilderness ... a pestilent waste of shattered trees, toxic soils, and scattered bones” (Gough 56). As Mudrooroo reveals to Indigenous people, “the entire universe is permeated with life [one characterised by an] interrelatedness with all existence, existence extending from the merely physical realms to the spiritual” (7). The ‘sacred mountain’ is a dominant, almost sentient character, for the land is at the core of all Indigenous relationships, economies, identities, and cultural practices. The warriors can seek refuge in the landscape; by contrast, the colonists are confined to the roads for the ‘bush’ is a dangerous, threatening environment. The battlefield in *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* is depicted as a conspirator with the Aboriginal people. It provides hiding places for ambush and weapons such as rocks which are used to prevent the colonists from attacking Multuggerah and his people. However, like a Great War battlefield, there is a sharp division of the landscape (Fussell), in a conceptual not a physical sense. It is still the same land, however the Aboriginal people’s deep affinity and connection is contrasted with images of the colonists’ treatment of the land and its decline, such as through the pollution of water caused by grazing sheep.

Ideational Metafunction

The appearance and status of Alfred in *Alfred's War* remains relatively unchanged throughout the book. After his first appearance on Spread 1 the following image is of Alfred sleeping with just his feet showing on a park bench with the text, "He slept in parks. On benches". Alfred's character in the story remains the same in terms of his clothing until memories of the war reveal their impact on him. "Like many of his mates, Alfred was wounded in battle, and he returned home with a gammy leg. On cold days it ached, but he didn't think about the pain. He just kept on walking" (Spread 10). The image of Alfred when he enlists and later shown in uniform is of a younger and more confident man (Spreads 6, 7, 11, 16).

Alfred's interactions are mostly solitary. Even when he is working at an Indigenous mission, he is depicted alone riding a horse and herding cows. "Alfred had grown up on a mission and, when he was old enough, he set off to find work. He worked as a gardener and a labourer, and mustered cattle on stations a long way from home" (Spread 6). Later in the story he does not interact with other characters at the Dawn Service for Anzac Day and is visually separated from the crowd.

"Every year on Anzac Day, Alfred walked to the nearest town for the dawn service. He stayed in the shadows until he heard the lament of the bugle, and then he quietly joined the people gathered in the morning light." (Spread 14)

The final spread (16) shows an image of him with the soldiers he served with which includes the handwritten words "Me and my mates, Great War 1917". The thirteen soldiers are in a symmetrical display of equal sized participants with the same spatial orientation. They maintain direct eye contact with the viewer and there is a sense of camaraderie between them.

In the other book *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* the key character Multuggerah is presented on the first spread as a full figure with full traditional body paint and ochre-coloured loin cloth, holding a spear and pointing across to the Sacred Mountain (Meewah). This image is accompanied by the text "Meet Multuggerah, a First Nations Leader from a long time ago ..." (Spread 1). The text is significant as the term 'First Nations' has been chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, whereas previous terms such as 'Indigenous' were coined by non-Indigenous people (Creative Spirits). However, throughout the rest of the book Multuggerah is not easily identified by the symbolic attributes provided in the first image and is instead presented in shadow or silhouette, or with other Aboriginal warriors making it difficult to distinguish him. The first image of Multuggerah, the reference to the meeting of the tribal leaders and farewelling them at the end of the story are the only clear references to his pivotal role in the Battle of Meewah yet, there are no clear visual links such as the full body painted symbols on Multuggerah's body depicted in Spread 1 that appear again throughout the story.

The story begins with Multuggerah (Spread 1) then immediately moves to the invasion of his country with images showing flocks of sheep, which were brought to Australia to provide food for the new colony. Although the images show a beautiful landscape with the sheep feeding and drinking at a waterhole, the text notes that they "spoil the country, scared away the native foods and fouled the water" (Spread 3). Spread 4 depicts an idyllic scene of Aboriginal people at dusk preparing food with children around a fire and an Aboriginal man carrying two fish that have just been caught. This calm and peaceful scene with a woman cuddling a child and

another boy sitting nearby smiling directly at the viewer is contrasted with the text which reveals that Multuggerah “worried for his people’s future”, yet without clearly identifying him in the image. Spread 5 depicts Multuggerah and two Aboriginal warriors watching the bullock dray being driven by the jackeroos from a high point on the mountain. Spreads 7 depict the calling of the Aboriginal warriors through a smoke signal on the Sacred Mountain and then their meeting. Spread 15 depicts the culminating battle of Meewah with the image depicting boulders rolling down the mountains towards the colonist who are feeling down the mountain towards their horses to ride away. Interestingly however, Multuggerah and the other Aboriginal people are now shown in the image and it appears the landscape itself is exacting revenge.

The landscape setting is consistent throughout the story despite the changing perspective as the warriors looking down at the jackeroos. The only significant change occurs when the tribal leaders are signalling from the very top of the mountain which is shown in aerial perspective in a dreamlike purple and grey colour with the figures on the mountain dwarfed by its grandeur. This depiction is similar to the jackeroos who are predominately seen from a distance as individuals or in small groups throughout the story. The systems PARTICIPANTS and PROCESSES encompass details to distinguish characters such as Alfred and Multuggerah, when they appear and reappear, the extent to which they are shown in the images, their relationship to other characters in the story and the unfolding of events.

Interpersonal Metafunction

The Interpersonal metafunction considers how images and text communicate meaning. The images in both books use a naturalistic style. Painter et al. observes that this means greater emotional repertoire can be achieved as the characters are seen to be real people and emotion can be read through facial expression, bodily stance and gestures. This effect is emphasised when the characters directly gaze at the viewer which occurs in *Alfred’s War* (Spread 7) when a younger Alfred engages with the viewer while writing a letter to his family and again in the sepia war photograph taken with the other soldiers he has served with (Spread 16). There are similarities that can be discerned from the image of Alfred’s younger self which assist in identifying him as sitting in the centre of the photograph in the front row gazing directly at the viewer/reader (Spread 16).

Alfred, however, does not engage in direct eye contact throughout the rest of the book. The text emphasises the different rules that applied to Aboriginal people at that time which revealed that Alfred often camped on the outskirts of town as “there were many places Aboriginal people weren’t allowed to go. That’s how life was in those days” (Spread 5). The character of Multuggerah is introduced on the first page (Spread 1) and engages directly with the viewer/reader however, after this point he does not engage directly with the reader again. Throughout the rest of the story he is focussed on protecting his people and country.

The images in both books use naturalistic colours without any black and white images. The palette used in *Alfred’s War* utilises mainly cool colours (cool yellows, blues, greens) which appears to complement Alfred’s sense of security in being outdoors. There are, however, instances of a reduced palette with darker tones which corresponds to the text which acknowledges his mental distress when remembering aspects of his war service: “Every so often, Alfred could hear the never-ending gunfire in his head and the whispers of young men praying. On those days, he curled into a ball and slept in the shadows” (Spread 12). The

reduction in colour emphasises the emotional withdrawal of Alfred as he tries to deal with the wartime horrors.

The images in *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* are also naturalistic with a predominately cool palette to reflect the landscape which includes mountains, grasses, and water. Panoramic views of the mountains are included with the use of perspective and diffused colour to represent distance. The sky also takes up a significant proportion of the page and is evident in all but two spreads which refer to the jackeroos and their bullock drays (Spread 5) and the decision by the tribal leaders to prevent the jackeroos from entering their country (Spread 8). These two spreads consist of darker tones and suggest a disconnect between the jackeroos and the environment. The systems of FOCALIZATION, AMBIENCE and GRADUATION are evident through instances of eye contact between the characters and the viewer, how colour and hue have been used to heighten emotion and the use of scale relative to other elements, such as the sacred mountain.

Textual Metafunction

Alfred's War is presented in portrait format while *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* is presented in landscape format. Both books predominately utilise page spreads—the image stretching across two pages. The text in both books is integrated by being overlaid on the images. The images in both books extend right to the page edges which has the effect of providing no boundary between the reader and the story. Both books also privilege the images rather than the text. The only spread in either book not to include any text is Spread 9 in *Alfred's War* which depicts three biplanes, denuded trees, barbed wire, and mud obliterating the sky. This appears to suggest that the horror that Alfred has seen cannot be articulated by text. In *Alfred's War* most images are centered except for three spreads: Spread 3 (Alfred sleeping under the stars), 8 (crowds cheering as Alfred leaves for the war with other soldiers on a ship) and 10 (Alfred trying to walk with his injured leg) which are positioned on a diagonal axis. This has the effect of creating dynamic energy and greater focus on the character or event. *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* contains polarised images on diagonal axes with most of these related to the battle with the jackeroos. The diagonal positioning of the images emphasises the steepness of the sacred mountain and the different groupings of the First Nations warriors and the jackeroos. The centered images which occur on Spreads 4 (Groups of Aboriginal people cooking and children playing), 6 (top of Sacred Mountain), and 12 (Aboriginal Warriors group) suggest calmness and the First Nations peoples' connection with the land. The system of INTERMODAL INTEGRATION which encompasses how images are presented on the page and how they are positioned to direct the viewer's attention has been used effectively to heighten key moments in both books.

Conclusion

Alfred's War is significant in the oeuvre of Australian children's picture books as the first to explore First Nations soldiers participating in a century long tradition that has installed the war time legacy as a "sacred parable" and a "true source of national communion" (McKenna 137-141). *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* likewise challenges mainstream histories which have traditionally portrayed Australian Indigenous people as passive recipients of colonisation.

Both books are informed by choices made by the authors and artists revealed through an analysis of the three metafunctions. The predominant presence of the landscape in both books emphasises Alfred and Multuggerah's profound connection with the land and provides an important alternative to children's picture books which explore conflicts such as the Great War. Australians have tended to look abroad when linking conceptions of nationhood with conflict; Indigenous people do not have to look anywhere near as far.

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