

Flower Fairies Down Under

Rhys Gardner

Introduction

A hundred years ago children's books teemed with talking animals, sentient wildflowers, and empathetic fairies. Social historians say this was part of a reaction against materialism and the despoliation of the natural world, and was largely carried out by women. Such considerations, and the history of the genre, have been examined elsewhere (Muir 1982, Holden 1992, Wood 2000); here I just want to mention some writer-artists (all female) from Australia and New Zealand whose works I think combine fantasy, plant lore and botanical illustration in a very pleasing way (Note 1).

The kind of work referenced in the next paragraphs is well represented in late nineteenth and twentieth century Australia and New Zealand, particularly in the former country, where there was an earlier emergence of a leisured class with its art societies, art-buyers, and parents willing to support artistic offspring. I list here only four Australians; others include Ethel Jackson Morris, Dorothy Hall [NZ born], Pixie O'Harris, Christian Yandell, Edith Alsop, Harold Gaze, and Peg Maltby.

Firstly, though the major contribution of Englishwoman Cicely Mary Barker (1895–1973) must be acknowledged. Her little books, published between 1923 and 1948, show angelic child-fairies lying among, climbing in, or declaiming from, an accurate and comprehensive depiction of English trees, shrubs and flowers. Through her, many a young naturalist must have learnt that plants are grouped in families and have family 'faces' (Oates 2015: 23). Laing (1995) is a biography of this devout and talented woman (Note 2).

Australia

1. May Gibbs (1877–1969) spent most of her life in Western Australia and Sydney. A biography (Holden & Brummit 2011) says that as a young adult she consistently won prizes for botanical art. Her children's stories about the little Gumnut People (Fig. 1) (at times in conflict with the Bad Banksia Men, who lack only motorbikes) seem to be much better known in Australia than New Zealand. Perhaps

children there are, like the plants, made of tougher stuff (Note 3; and see Note from the Australian editor, below References).

2. Ida Rentoul Outhwaite (1888–1960), who lived in Melbourne, has also been given an illustrated biography (Muir and Holden 1986). In her 1933 "A Book of Wild Flowers" the plants have equal place with the fairies (Fig. 2). She enjoyed considerable success in her lifetime and is now called "The Queen of the Fairies", at least by entrepreneurs selling her artwork on-line, though the title should probably be shared with Nuri Mass (<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-143427620>, and see below).

3. The third and fourth Australian writer-artists are Celeste Mass and her daughter Nuri (1918–93). In their joint works Celeste drew the fairies and Nuri the flora (Fig. 3). The stories are amusing (Note 4) and well-informed about ecological matters. Nuri Mass also wrote and illustrated a book (1967) on mountain flowers.

New Zealand

1. Emily Harris (1837–1925) came to this country as a child. In the 1890s she produced three books of plant lithographs. Some were hand-coloured and prints of several of these were issued by the Alexander Turnbull Library in the 1960s and '70s. Her plant drawings in a fairy-book by Mrs A. E. Moore (1909) get a mention by Sampson (1985), although he hints of their being upstaged by the text's cast of fairies, smugglers, Australian geologist, unfortunately-named Maori servant Te Kooti, and tuatara who turns into a prince.

2. Avis Acres (1910–94) was born in Wellington. The family moved to Auckland in 1913, and some short time after that, among the trees and rocks of her home at 10 Grange Road, Mt Eden, she came upon fairies (Ireton 1993; ROG unpublished fieldwork). Her three "Hutu and Kawa" books of the '50s were widely enjoyed and expressed a strong conservation ethic too (Fig. 4). But they fell out of favour when educators decided that fantasy should not be part of a child's mental diet.

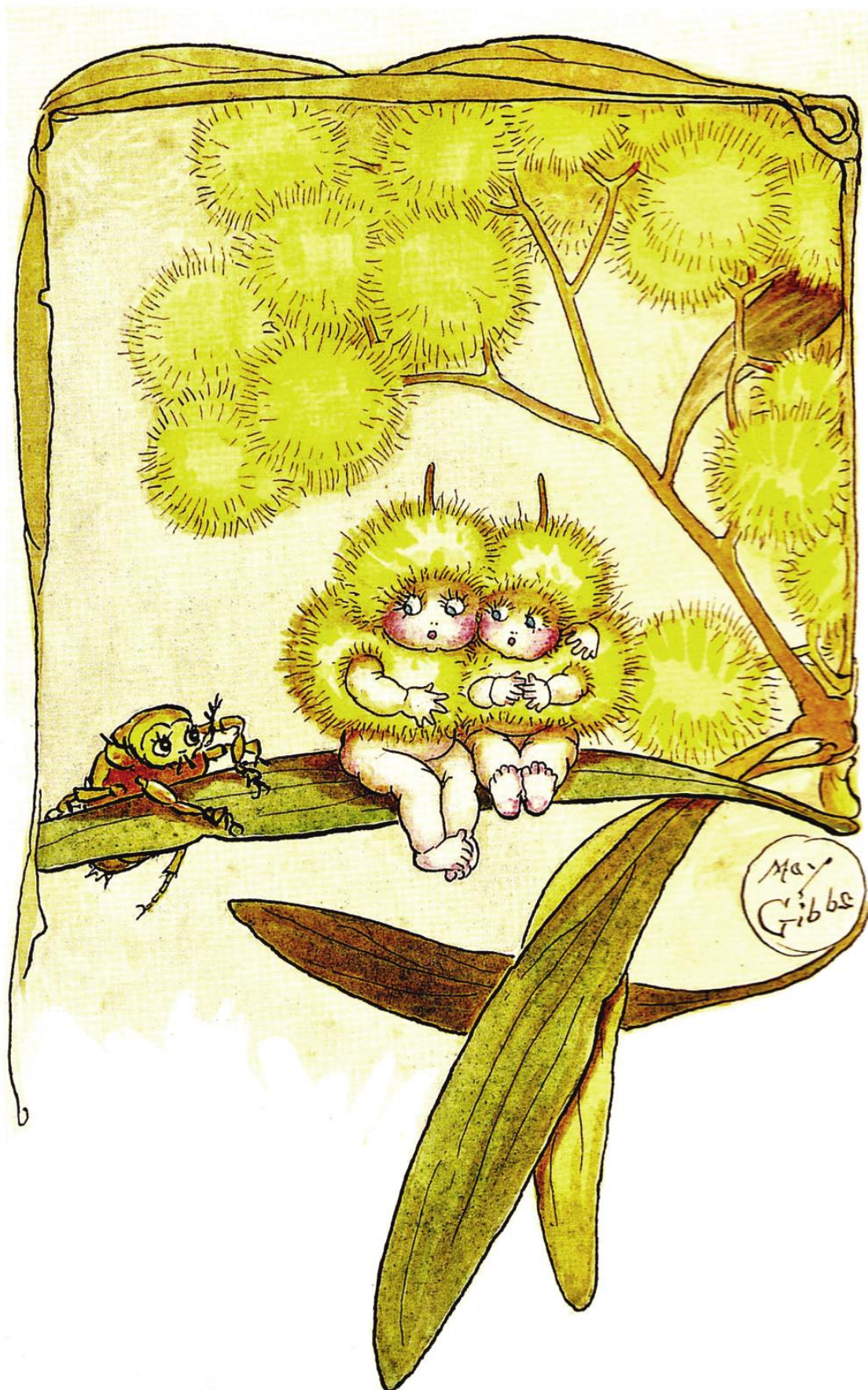


Fig. 1. Wattle Babies [Sitting on the phyllode of an *Acacia* sp., Mimosaceae]. (Gibbs 1922, cover).



Fig. 2. Blue Pincushion [*Brunonia australis*, Goodeniaceae]. Outhwaite (1948: 11).



Fig. 3. Flannel Flower [*Actinotus helianthi*, Apiaceae]. Mass (1945: 43).

Notes

1 Such fairy-tale works were always illustrated, and generally, in the art schools of the time, even males intent on 'serious art' would be required to make lengthy studies of flowers, leaves and trees. For example, a leading book on the subject (Cole 1920) has a ten-page bibliography of Floras from around the world, with comments on the quality of their artwork.

2 I have to say that Cicely Mary Barker's influence over my youthful self, west of the Whau, was rather slight. Not to say that wildflower botany was completely lacking: Waikumete Cemetery was a botanical paradise, and clay paddocks and waste areas bore uninhibited growths of wattle, gorse, blackberry and watsonia. The supernatural was not lacking, either. A fairy godmother looked after the New Lynn Library; there was a good witch close to home, her tall hedges edged in spring with a magical abundance of freesias; and in the State Housing over



Fig. 4. The Kowhai Kiddies and the Fuchsia Fairies brought pots of fresh golden honey. (Acres 1955: [p. 8]).

the ridge, out of sight but not always out of mind, especially on the afternoon walk back from school, there were certainly goblins.

3 The opportunity for children to interact with real-life gumnuts must be much greater in Australia, too. Nearly all the old eucalypts I knew in Auckland in the 1980s have been destroyed by one or other of our local giants (Uncontrolled Growth, Health N. Safety, Council Pusillanimity, Arborists' Self-interest). And the remaining park and street trees have had their 'crowns lifted' so high — in order to appease the Bad Mower Men — that to see their fruits now a child would need to be a fairy.

4 Nuri and Celeste Mass also wrote a delightful fantasy "The Little Grammar People" (1942), in which a pair of Australian children (Linda and Barry !) interact with the often-irregular Master Verb, Little Boy Preposition, Madame Adjective, etc.

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Note from the Australian editor (Joshua Salter) – The Bad Banksia Men were indeed unforgettable (Fig. 5). Sadly, children's literature ain't what it used to be.



Fig. 5. "The Wicked Banksia Man" making off with a Gumnut Baby. Drawing by May Gibbs.
 From 'The Complete Adventures of Snugglespot and Cuddlepip', 1918.
 Publisher: Angus & Robertson, Pymble, N.S.W.