

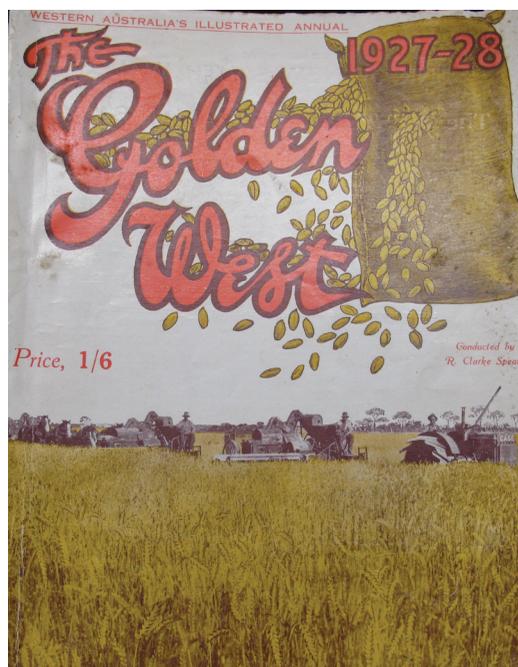
# *Child Verse and the New Education in the Western Australian Wheatbelt, 1901–1939*

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**T**HE VALENCY OF THE “WEST” IN AUSTRALIA is complicated by the Nullarbor Plain, which places nearly twelve hundred kilometers of arid and barely populated land between the demographically dominant east coast of Australia and the southwest corner of the continent, which hosts the city of Perth and its agricultural hinterland. For the states of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia, “West” means more or less what it might mean in the United States, which is a kind of frontier where the values of the “East” get gradually loosened and revitalized and made more elemental. For Western Australians, perched predominantly on the edge of the Indian Ocean, our “west” is east, for it is to the east that things get drier, the sun brighter, and the horizon broader. The difference between the two continents is exacerbated because the colonization of Australia’s West did not advance overland in a steady march to the drumbeat of manifest destiny but rather radiated outward from a remote port city (Perth) that had been largely unable to extend its influence into the interior for the first seventy years of its existence. Nevertheless, the cultural resonance of the “West”—the “Wild West” of pulp Westerns and Hollywood cinema—was regularly invoked as the belated agricultural expansion took place through the southwest in the course of the twentieth century to create the Western Australian Wheatbelt.

Western Australia’s Wheatbelt—simply the “Wheatbelt” hereafter—sprung dramatically into existence in the first decades of the twentieth century (fig. 1). It was a late instantiation of two parallel global phenomena that transformed the shape of the world as an inhabited geography over the last two or three centuries. The first phenomenon was the mass settler colonialism that saw European nation-states laying claim to lands in North and South America, southern Africa,



**FIGURE 1.**  
Cover of *The Golden West*, an  
illustrated annual produced  
between 1924 and 1949.

and Australasia for agricultural usage. This practice took place with unprecedented rapidity and on a continental scale over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its primary mechanism was the granting of land by colonial powers in return for investment in agricultural production by an occupying agriculturalist—usually, but not exclusively, drawn from its own citizenry (the “settler”).<sup>1</sup> The second phenomenon was the widespread agricolonization of temperate rangelands for cereal grain production across the Americas and the Caucasus and through the successive wheatbelts of Australasia from the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It is at the intersection of settler colonialism and the emerging global trade in exported grain that Western Australia’s Wheatbelt emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the years between 1900 and 1980 it grew to encompass an area of land roughly equal to England and involved the clearing of 130,000 square kilometers by 1968. In this essay, I would like to focus on the early years of this process, from the turn of the century to the outbreak of the Second World War. During these decades, the founding of the Wheatbelt was considered a heroic social venture that enjoyed widespread support and was taken up by a significant number of Western Australians and immigrants, who came in large numbers from overseas and interstate. The lens I want to use in the assessment of the Wheatbelt’s early years is the one that emerges through the creative writing of the children of Wheatbelt farms, written as part of their education. By considering this very particular archive, we might apprehend something of the imaginative coordinates of those who undertook the risky and arduous work of creating profitable cereal farms from ancient bushland. Indeed, I contend that the poems of the children reflect with surprising acuity the hopes of their parents and, beyond them, of the broader enterprise of the Wheatbelt.

<sup>1</sup> L. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> D. W. Meinig, *On the Margins of the Good Earth: The South Australian Wheat Frontier, 1869–1884* (1962; Adelaide: Rigby, 1970). More recently, China and India have become the largest producers of wheat in the world.

### OUR RURAL MAGAZINE

The development of the Wheatbelt was made possible by the 1890s gold rush, which transformed the previously languishing colony of Western Australia. The population of Western Australia doubled between 1891 (50,000) and 1895 (100,000) and had nearly doubled again by 1901 (184,000).<sup>3</sup> This caused a major strain on government infrastructure, not least of which were the state's schools, which understandably struggled to cope with the massive increase in demand. A few statistics capture this event: in 1896 school enrollments increased by 50 percent; between 1897 and 1903 the number of schools almost doubled, from 82 to 150; finally, the school population, which was 3,000 in 1897, grew to 9,000 in 1903, 30,000 in 1908, and reached 40,000 in 1913.<sup>4</sup> During this period schools were opening at a rate of 20 per year. The majority of the new schools were in the new agricultural areas—predominantly the Wheatbelt.<sup>5</sup> These agricultural areas were being opened with significant government assistance, reflecting the popular apprehension that the gold rushes had created a historic opportunity for Australia's West. In short, the gold boom had brought a population that could finally realize the long-held dream of close settlement of the southwest.<sup>6</sup>

Wheat frontiers were propelled by rail lines laid to service the industry, and schools were not far behind. Indeed, one could track the founding of the Wheatbelt by the opening of schools one by one as the district became settled. Of the 300 new schools opened in the agricultural areas (mainly the Wheatbelt), Mossenson notes that most were single-teacher schools catering to between ten and twenty students. While expensive, the funding of schools was considered central to the development of the Wheatbelt, and the Wheatbelt was the major post-gold-rush development program, occupying the attention of the top level of state government, spawning new bureaucracies, and dominating successive elections. As Mossenson explains: "Because of their size and isolation, the rural schools were expensive units per pupil but the Moore and Scaddan governments were determined to sponsor land settlement, and access to schooling was an inducement they advertised at home and in Britain."<sup>7</sup>

Despite the opening of the new schools, there were still many children who lived beyond ready reach of a school, and for these the government from an early stage began implementing

<sup>3</sup> M. Trinca, "Launching the Ship: A Constitutional History of Western Australia," pt. 3, "The Goldrush," <http://www.constitutionalcentre.wa.gov.au/ResearchAndSeminarPapers/LaunchingTheShip/Pages/TheGoldrush.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> D. Mossenson, *State Education in Western Australia, 1829–1960* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1972), 124.

<sup>5</sup> There were also agricultural districts targeting the dairy and orchard industries, but it was wheat that was the main cash crop and accounted for the overwhelming majority of new farms.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent consideration of the agricultural ambitions of the Swan River colony, see J. M. R. Cameron, *Ambition's Fire: The Agricultural Colonization of Pre-convict Western Australia* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1981). The history of agriculture in Western Australia, and particularly the Wheatbelt, has received significant scholarly attention. The following works are all, in their way, central to understanding its history, but this list is in no way exhaustive: J. B. Gabbedy, *Yours Is the Earth: The Life and Times of Charles Mitchell* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1972); G. C. Bolton, *A Fine Country to Starve In* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1972); G. H. Burvill, ed., *Agriculture in Western Australia: 150 Years of Development and Achievement, 1829–1979* (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1979); Quentin Beresford et al., *The Salinity Crisis: Landscapes, Communities and Politics* (2001; Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2004); and Bruce Devenish, *Sir James Mitchell: Premier and Governor of Western Australia* (Carlisle, WA: Hesperian Press, 2014).

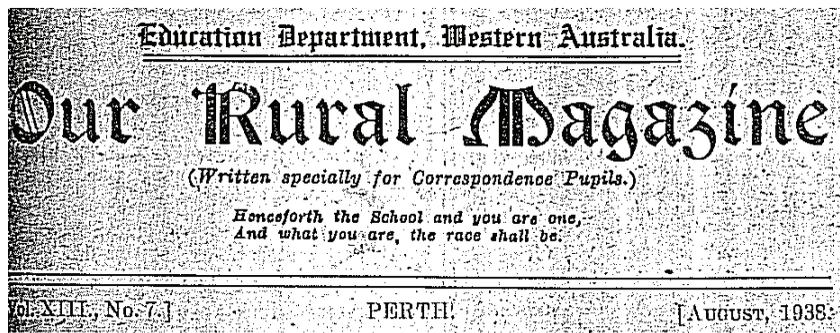
<sup>7</sup> Mossenson (*State Education in Western Australia*, 124) is referring to Newton Moore, Liberal state premier (1906–10), and John Scaddan, Labor state premier (1911–16).

distance education, creating the WA Correspondence School in 1918. To assist in the instruction of correspondence students, the Education Department began in 1926 to publish a monthly magazine that it mailed out to those enrolled in its correspondence classes. The magazine was called *Our Rural Magazine* (1926–46) and was sent not only to correspondence students but also to the one-teacher rural schools for use as a common class resource. The magazine carried a motto that pointed to an investment in rural schools that went beyond merely selling the practical advantages of country life to would-be settlers: “Henceforth the School and you are one, / And what you are, the race shall be” (fig. 2).

The grandiosity of the motto is perhaps not untypical—many school mottoes took the form of uplifting maxims—but the explicit designation of children as the bearers of the racial telos does appear here in an unusually naked form. Yet this linkage between land and race was an important dimension in 1930s thinking, popular not only within Fascism and Communism but also among the intelligentsia more generally. T. S. Eliot, for instance, writing in 1934, links the idea of tradition—which was at the heart of his cultural theory—directly with the natural, physical environment. He writes that the “happiest” lands are

those in which a long struggle of adaptation between man and his environment has brought out the best qualities of both; in which the landscape has been moulded by numerous generations of one *race*, and in which the landscape in turn has modified the *race* to its character. (emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

It is race in this sense—as the reification of social unity as material status quo—that the Correspondence School was invoking in its motto. And, like Eliot, the school was drawn into the identification of social relations with the “environment” experienced in the form of “landscape.” *Our Rural Magazine*, as we shall see, provides a peculiarly poignant insight into the ideological work that children are called upon to do in the service of such illusions.<sup>9</sup> The motto insists, after all, that it is their “racial” obligation to do so.



**FIGURE 2.**  
Front cover of *Our Rural Magazine*, showing the magazine’s motto.

<sup>8</sup> These remarks derive from Eliot’s lectures at the University of Virginia in 1933, subsequently published as *After Strange Gods: A Primer on Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934). While Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) had committed the literary artist to a regime of cultural immersion (i.e., immersion into the totality of the “important” writing of one’s culture), from which the precious few will emerge with the ability to genuinely advance that tradition, Eliot’s later lecture draws back from this idea of tradition being acquired by an act of will. Tradition, Eliot writes in this later work, is “rather a way of feeling and acting which characterises a group throughout generations.” And this, he suggests, “must largely be . . . unconscious” — “of the blood . . . rather than of the brain” (*After Strange Gods*, 29–30).

<sup>9</sup> It was the determined project of Raymond Williams’s great work, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), to shatter this illusion.

*Our Rural Magazine* addressed its students in a friendly and cheerful way, conscious of its status as a mediating voice between the realities of rural life and the demands of formal education. The tone of voice was to stand in for the more properly enveloping scholastic environment (e.g., graded grammar schools) available in towns and cities. An issue of *Our Rural Magazine* typically began with an editorial by an invited guest, usually a person of prominence, who addressed the students and reminded them that though they were isolated, they were not forgotten. So, for instance, in the March 1938 issue, Herbert Powell, the president of the Wheatgrowers' Union of Western Australia, wrote:

Dear Boys and Girls,

I gladly accede to the request of the Head Teacher of your school to send a message to you through "Our Rural Magazine" and here I will make a confession: When my boys were attending school at Bruce Rock, I used to look forward eagerly to receiving "Our Rural Magazine" because I found it of the greatest interest. It is a publication unique in many ways, because, although it is written for Correspondence pupils, it is also very interesting to adults, and it is quite possible that many parents anticipate its arrival in the home just as eagerly as the children.

The magazine contained articles, stories, illustrations, and poems pitched broadly to encompass children aged between five and fifteen. Writers were drawn from the local population of Western Australia and also from across Australia. Well-known stories and poems from the broader Anglophone canon were also reproduced. But of special significance to us are the magazine's final pages, which consisted of contributions—poems, stories, anecdotes—from the rural students themselves. And it is these student works that I wish to consider in some detail in the remainder of this essay. In particular, I will be concentrating on poems that were reprinted in an anthology of student poetry titled *Brave Young Singers* (1938; fig. 3) and were selected from *Our Rural Magazine* over the previous decade.<sup>10</sup> Both the magazine and the anthology covered the entirety of rural and remote Western Australia, but it was the Wheatbelt that was the demographically dominant vector in this vast hinterland, and without its small-holding families, it is difficult to imagine the state apparatus having got together to address its "brave young singers" quite as decidedly as it did.

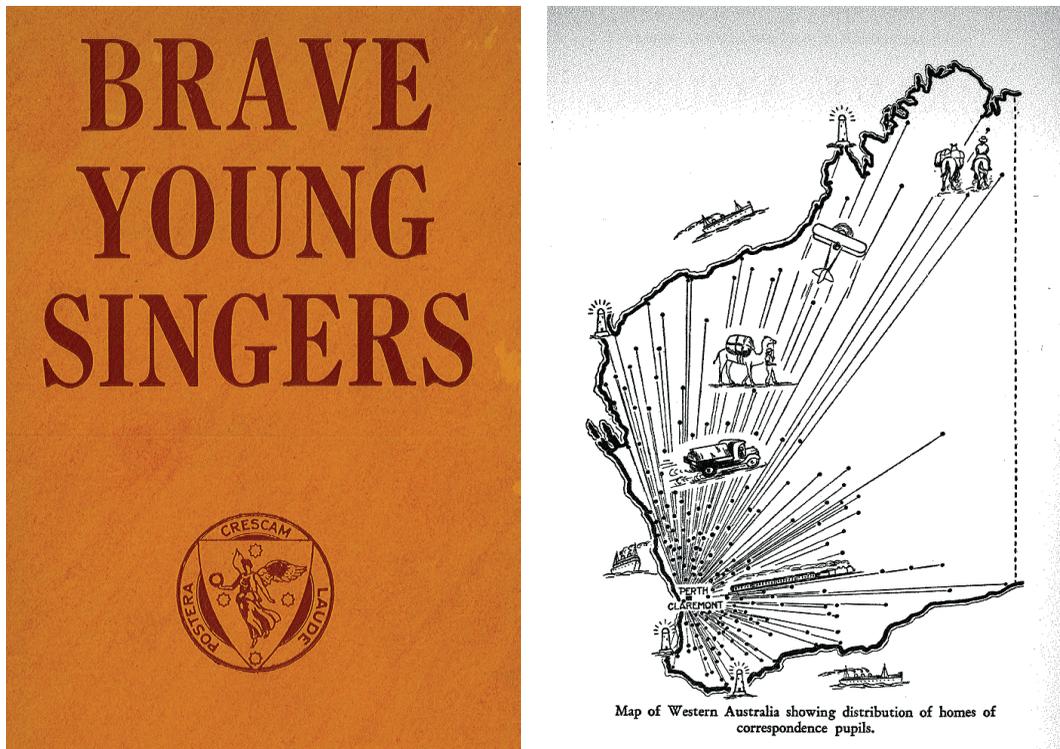
### **BRAVE YOUNG SINGERS**

The editor of *Brave Young Singers*, J. A. Miles, was the superintendent of the Correspondence School and also the senior inspector of schools. He had been an enthusiastic advocate of the teaching of verse composition to rural children and was responsible for its introduction to the curriculum of the Correspondence School in 1928. He writes of the motivation for this practice in his introductory remarks to *Brave Young Singers*:

One of the aims strenuously pursued by the Correspondence Classes is to exploit to the fullest possible extent those avenues of self-expression which lead to the enrichment of the emotional and intellectual life, and to the fuller development of the personality. It is for this reason that so much attention has been devoted to verse composition.

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<sup>10</sup> J. A. Miles, ed., *Brave Young Singers: An Anthology of Child Verse Compiled from the Work of Pupils of the Correspondence Classes of Western Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1938).



**FIGURE 3.** Brave Young Singers (1938), cover and frontispiece.

It is worth recalling the conditions in which teaching creative writing came to be seen as an integral part of the pedagogies of literacy in the early part of the twentieth century. The idea that schooling ought to encourage self-expression was one that was introduced into Western Australia by Cyril Jackson, the state's first inspector general of education. The Oxford-trained Jackson had been a member of the London Board of Education and was associated with the "New Education" movement of that time. His tenure as inspector general lasted from 1897 to 1903 but was to leave a deep imprint in Western Australian pedagogy. The New Education that Jackson evangelized constituted the student as a social project and was based on the principle, familiar to us now but radical then, that it was the task of schools to teach students to teach themselves:

Its guiding principle is that the elementary school is to be a basis for future self-education; it is to leave in the child an intelligent and alert mind—the power to observe and learn—rather than furnish him with a string of memorised facts which he may remember but will more probably forget. The methods of teaching are laid down as from the known to the unknown, from the observation of individual things to their comparison and correlation, and thence to the higher processes of thought.<sup>11</sup>

These "higher processes of thought" that Jackson mentions might well include the assimilation of ideology, which in the capitalist era requires a subject to mistake the wants of the market for their innermost desires and aspirations. In this way we each freely choose to do exactly what

<sup>11</sup> Cyril Jackson quoted in Mossenson, *State Education in Western Australia*, 97.

is expected of us, and our overt individualism—our selfishness, in fact—is the evidence of the social contract.

Jackson's New Education is thus utterly consistent with the new kinds of subjectivity that capitalism was necessitating in the twentieth century. The New Education movement introduced a new curriculum that signaled a decisive departure from previous repetition-based instruction. Drawing, singing, metalwork, and woodwork as well as “domestic economy” all became part of the new program of study. Other distinctive features of this pedagogical turn were the emergence of kindergartens (Maria Montessori opened her first school in 1907) and a pronounced interest, stemming ultimately from Rousseau, in the relationship between play and learning in early childhood. In young children, drawing was emphasized and so was the use of object lessons. In this context, one might see that J. A. Miles regarded poetry as an extension, at the level of language, of the principle of learning through play. Moreover, the idea that learning moved from the known to the unknown had the effect of encouraging a form of learning that adapted itself to its environment. For instance, geography and history lessons began with local geography and history. Nature studies, part of the new curriculum, began with the local natural environment, and teacher-led nature walks were encouraged. The New Education thus contained in its precepts a disposition toward regionalism.

The very idea of a “region” was, in fact, something that was beginning to take hold during the course of the twentieth century, particularly in the wake of Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels and, in the United States, with the novels of William Faulkner. Indeed, in the essay quoted above, T. S. Eliot specifically saw regions as mediating between unity and diversity, protecting culture from the excesses of each. In this way, the Wheatbelt, like other “West,” was infused with a utopian impulse.

Yet the emphasis that the New Education placed on self-expression can be misleading if taken in isolation. All education is overdetermined by social imperatives that cast limits on the curiosity of a child as the generative basis of learning. In our case, it is noteworthy that Miles regarded the poetic work of these students to be not just charming but heroic. He writes that “these brave young children of loneliness and adversity have not only conquered the drawbacks of their environment, but have actually turned them to good account.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the poems not only expressed the innate selfhood of the child but also participated in the existential and ideological labor required to colonize the southwestern hinterland of Western Australia. One might note, as well, that this new model of education had the effect of elevating the value of the teacher. Cyril Jackson insisted, “A schoolmaster needs not only tact and cheerfulness but culture, knowledge, and method.”<sup>13</sup> Jackson raised teachers' salaries and made teacher training a priority. Claremont Teachers' Training College opened, after some delay, in 1902 and became the main institution for the formal education of Western Australian teachers. However, despite these improvements, the conditions for teachers in rural schools remained difficult and the Education Department battled high resignation rates. There was, in fact, a formalized discrimination between rural and urban teachers, with the former receiving only twelve months of training, while the “regular” teacher training was two years. In 1908 the Country Teachers' Association was formed and began to publish the *W.A. Teachers' Journal* on a monthly basis in order to provide a sense of shared mission and a practical means of exchanging teaching ideas. It is with these particular hardships in

<sup>12</sup> Miles, *Brave Young Singers*, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Mossenson, *State Education in Western Australia*, 96.

mind that Mossenson makes the persuasive claim that “those who remained in charge of remote schools for any length of time pioneered the Wheatbelt in perhaps as true a sense as the parents of the children they taught.”<sup>14</sup>

### **BABY PLANTS AND LITTLE BROWN NUTS**

Let us look, then, at the poems in *Brave Young Singers*, particularly those that seem to directly or implicitly describe the Wheatbelt. Broadly speaking, the poems in *Brave Young Singers* can be grouped into three categories: poems about growing produce, nature poems, and fairy poems. It was not uncommon, in fact, for all three elements to feature in the same poem. But a poem that fits the first category—a paean to the productive agricultural process—was ten-year-old Muriel Philbin’s “Baby Plants,” whose final lines merrily declare:

The shoots grow up as green as green,  
The finest wheat the farmer’s seen;  
The wheat turns yellow, then it’s ripe;  
The farmer boasts with all his might;  
It’s harvested and sent away;  
The farmer is the town folks’ stay.<sup>15</sup>

Here, in miniature, is the basic libidinal structure of the Wheatbelt as a social enterprise. On the one hand, there is the invocation of the “natural” cycles that determine the production of annual cereal crops and that tap into the deep history of European agricultural subsistence. The pattern, ingrained in folk memory since Neolithic times, is one of a winter when things die and a spring when things are planted and a summertime harvest, before the whole cycle recommences. But we also see coming into view in the poem’s final line an investment in the fact of an agricultural hinterland “feeding” those in the city. While certainly true in many respects, Williams reminds us in *The Country and the City* that while it seems “obvious” that cities are sustained by the country, we often overlook the equally material way in which cities also produce—through the constancy of their “surplus” demand—the country. The key ideological achievement of young Muriel’s poem, and a sign of her precocious interpellation, is the neat blending of this relationship of production and consumption (in the city/country dialectic) with the “natural” cycle of the season. In this way, she offers a powerful display of the “higher processes of thought” that the New Education movement sought to nurture. There is one more element to stress in this poem, and it applies to many of the wheat poems in *Brave Young Singers*, which is that the wheat is an unstable signifier. This is because, from the standpoint of ecology (i.e., the very “nature” that is lovingly evoked), the wheat is not an affirmation but a terrible and near-total negation. In order for the wheat to be grown, the land first had to be “cleared” of its ancient biodiverse woodlands. Indeed, clearing was a major element in the work of the Wheatbelt throughout this period. It was by agreeing to clear that land that it was granted, and agricultural loans were dependent on the quantity of clearing completed. One was advanced money as and when land-clearing targets were met. The Wheatbelt would not have happened, at least not until the age of machine-clearing that dawned in the 1950s, without this fundamental incentive being in place.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>15</sup> Miles, *Brave Young Singers*, 26.

If *Brave Young Singers* has a star, it is undoubtedly the unfortunately named Alice Bland. Bland's poems are liberally scattered through the volume, including the following, called "Almond Blossoms," written when Bland was nine years old and expressing a common Wheatbelt motif, that of regeneration:

To-day beneath the almond tree  
 I see the white flowers lie;  
 The boughs are looking sad and brown,  
 Their lovely blossoms all thrown down  
 To perish and to die.

But soon the bare brown arms will be  
 A clustering mass of green,  
 And little velvet almonds show  
 That quickly into brown nuts grow  
 Where once the flowers had been.<sup>16</sup>

Almond trees were fairly ubiquitous on Wheatbelt farms in the twentieth century, being among the few commonly propagated food-producing trees that could survive the dry, hot summers that prevail from November to April in the southwest. Like the "Baby Plants" poem by Philbin, Bland's poem "Almond Blossoms" depicts a cyclical pattern of growth that culminates in the ripening of a seed destined for human consumption. But in this case, instead of directly addressing the wheat growing in the field, the process of agricultural production is viewed through the almond tree—its slender nut references the grain of wheat. Grown in the assiduously maintained gardens surrounding the Wheatbelt homestead, almond trees, along with other fruit trees, were kept alive by the careful rationing of rainwater and animal manure, and the fruits they yielded were treasured in proportion to the care that was needed to nurse them through the adverse summers. But more particularly for Bland's poem, the almond tree was (literally in most cases) a "screen" between the domestic interior of the home and the agricultural exterior world of the "fields." One would look out through the window of the house and through the almond tree into the fields beyond (fig. 4).

Perhaps it is because the almond tree is able to function as a screen that Bland's poem, much more seriously than Philbin's, references the inevitable dimension of loss that must precede any claim for regeneration. Indeed, the pivotal clause in the poem—"their lovely blossoms all thrown down / To perish and to die"—speaks plainly of a certain wanton wastage. In the poem's preceding stanzas we have been told that during the night the petals had been plucked and tossed to the ground by "little fairies" "pretending they were snow." In hazarding an interpretation of this poem one might plausibly allow the point of reference to be a double one: heading both inward toward the poem's speaking voice and the lifeworld of a nine-year-old girl on a new Wheatbelt farm and then outward to the fields beyond, still being hacked and burned into existence. So, via the screen of the almond tree we see a gesture toward the ecological destruction that was hardly invisible to the children of Wheatbelt farms, since it was a plain and continuing fact of life in these opening decades of the twentieth century. But equally, because the almond tree is a screen that

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



**FIGURE 4.**  
The remains of Dorothy  
Hewett's house, with  
two dead almond trees  
in the middle ground.  
Lucy Dougan, Hewett's  
niece, is in the foreground.  
(Photo by author)

intercedes between the poem's speaking witness (i.e., the "I see" subject) and the fields beyond, the tree also takes on the pubescent contours of the girl.

Of course, one cannot finally ratify such hypotheses, but one might beg that the onus at least be reversed, so that the question to be answered would simply be why a girl on a farm would see an almond tree in just this way. If my reading was credited, however, then the "brown nuts" could be an image of both the young girl's reproductive destiny and the *productive* destiny of the land now brought under cultivation. Where Philbin's poem "Baby Plants" had mapped the seasonal cereal cycle onto the dialectics of country and city, Bland's poem "Almond Blossoms" interiorizes the process as the emblem of a girl's coming-of-age. With the image of the almond functioning like a tiny machine for the translation of metaphors, the vanquishment of the natural world is tethered to the foreclosure of the infantile world, and the "brown nuts" emerge as a pregnant chain of signifiers stretched across the chasm of these losses. This elementary substitution, in which loss is replaced with "gain," is one that runs through many of the poems in *Brave Young Singers* and is probably, after all, why the editor was moved to call these singers brave.

*Brave Young Singers* also contains the first published poem by Dorothy Hewett, written when she was nine years old. Growing up on a wheat farm between Wickepin and Yealering in the 1920s and 1930s, Hewett would become the most significant writer to emerge from the Wheatbelt. A major Australian poet and playwright, and one of its more irascible intellectuals, Hewett's writing career began almost as soon as she could write.<sup>17</sup> Educated by correspondence, Hewett wrote extensively and precociously as a child, duly sending her poems to *Our Rural Magazine* as well as to the Royal Show held in Perth each year. It was at the Royal Show that she met her nemesis, Alice Bland, who was winning all the writing prizes that the young Hewett coveted, as she was able to recall many years later in her autobiography, *Wild Card*:

every year I win second prize for illustrated stories and poetry at the Royal Show. Only Alice Bland always beats me. We both have our poems published in a Correspondence School

<sup>17</sup> Hewett's juvenilia have been usefully edited and printed in Christine Alexander, *Dorothy Hewett: "The Gypsy Dancer" and Early Poems* (Sydney: Juvenilia Press, 2009).

publication called *Brave Young Singers*. I despise Alice Bland's poetry. It's all about helping her mother and being a domestic treasure. At the Royal Show I am introduced to her in the Agricultural Pavilion. She is a wholesome-looking brunette with short bobbed hair, several years older and taller than I am. Impossible, though, to see her as a rival. It doesn't make sense.<sup>18</sup>

This apprehension of difference, of being at one remove from what she saw as the trite affirmations of a girl like Alice Bland, is visible in Hewett's child verse. Indeed, one can see a distinct difference in register in Hewett's "Dreaming" when it is compared with poems by the other children in *Brave Young Singers*. "Dreaming" is a fairy poem but it is noteworthy for the way that it does not internalize the fantasy in the way that the other children's verse does. This does not prevent her from having the fantasy; it is just that it is no sooner had than disavowed as just a dream, after all:

I'm sitting up here in the old gum tree,  
And a dear little robin is singing to me.  
I'm dreaming of dragons, princes and kings,  
Of fairies, gnomes, elfins, goblins, and things.

Sometimes I hear the fairies pass,  
Perhaps it is only the wind in the grass.  
I am not frightened, I couldn't fall,  
Sitting up here in my armchair tall.

I dream that I'm a cavalier bold,  
Rescuing princesses in times of old.  
But of course I'm only pretending, you see,  
And my castle is just the old gum tree.<sup>19</sup>

In this poem, the fairy fantasy is made to appear as fantasy: "But of course I'm only pretending, you see, / And my castle is just the old gum tree." "Dreaming" is a cheeky, daring poem exhibiting Hewett's trademark swagger ("I am not frightened, I couldn't fall") and a premonition of the Wheatbelt her adult work would give to us. In this way, Hewett's poetry is already introducing a characteristic ironic distance that refuses to see authorized fantasy structures—not simply the world of fairies given to children but the very fantasy structure of the Wheatbelt itself—as legitimizing her subjective position. The speaker in Hewett's poem does not derive her substance from the "baby plants" in the fields or the "brown nuts" on the almond tree but hovers above in a tree, conscious of the act of fabulation.

In broader cultural terms we can find in these poems by Wheatbelt children that particular late Victorian sense of childhood so enduringly evoked in the writing of J. M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll, and, particularly, Rudyard Kipling. In Australia, we find this echoed in the works of Ethel Pedley, Mary Grant Bruce, May Gibbs, and Norman Lindsay. One senses in these "stories for children," in both Australia and Britain, an effort to remake the stark symbolic terrain of modernity by calling upon the fairies and pixies of a disappearing oral folk tradition. Thus animated, the stories became a forum for playing out the world's adult struggles in disguised form. The distinctive dimension of Australian children's authors was the way that this fairy world was

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Hewett, *Wild Card: An Autobiography, 1923–1958* (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1990), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Miles, *Brave Young Singers*, 32.

mapped on to Australian animals and plants, sometimes invoking a vulgar appeal to Aboriginal creation myths. These associations were also repeated in the child verse in *Brave Young Singers*.

### J. K. EWERS

In his preface to *Brave Young Singers*, J. A. Miles describes the instruction that the correspondence students received in the art of creative writing, and poetry in particular. He states that the first step was to inculcate a love of poetry by exposing students to it from an early age. Cheap paperback readers, such as *Nelson's Literature Practice* and *Pattern Poetry*, were made available to correspondence students upon request.<sup>20</sup> These little books provided examples of poetry and prose, followed by a series of questions and prompts to think about them. For instance, after being given the famous opening stanza of Keats's *Endymion* ("A thing of beauty . . ."), the student is asked to "name some of the most beautiful things you have seen" and to consider "what powers of the mind help you to recall them." Also: "When is a tree most beautiful?" and "Is a tree ever ugly?" Such open-ended questions are familiar to any of us who teach literature, but they show how literature, at an early point in the twentieth century, was involved in the activity of subjective formation. Miles saw that creative writing by the student was a logical next step to the study of creative writing. Prepared by their study of poetry, the young students were invited by their correspondence teacher to "write a few lines of verse on any subject that appeals to them" and send it to their teacher, who would in turn offer kindly advice and suggestions. If the poetry was of an especially good quality, it was earmarked as such and given to a "special teacher—one who has given evidence of more than ordinary literary ability," and this teacher would provide an ongoing poetic mentorship to these students throughout their enrollment in the Correspondence School.<sup>21</sup>

Not everyone was immediately convinced of the utility of teaching children to write poetry. J. K. Ewers (1904–78)—an important Wheatbelt writer in his own right—began his working life in a one-teacher school in the tiny Wheatbelt hamlet of South Tammin in 1924, where he lived and taught for three years. An ambitious and observant young man, he cherished a desire to make a life as a writer and had already begun contributing poems, stories, and articles to newspapers and magazines. In 1930 he contributed an article to the *W.A. Teachers' Journal* on the teaching of verse composition in schools:

In Australia you never know when you may be talking to a poet. The place simply bristles with them. Since 1900 there have been over 2,000 volumes of verse published in Australia alone. The perpetrators of these atrocities are just ordinary men and women like you and me. They dress the same, and speak the same, and look the same. Like [Henry] Kendall, their "singing robes are worn in stolen moments," so that there is nothing whatsoever about them to distinguish them from the man in the street. You may even puff smoke into the face of Australia's rising Milton as you sit in a tram-car. In view of the alarming preponderance of such people, one naturally hesitates before becoming instrumental in augmenting their numbers.<sup>22</sup>

In this wry fashion, Ewers goes on to question the value of forcing children to write poetry. Ewers's own position on the value of teaching verse composition oscillates between a desire to

<sup>20</sup> Richard Wilson, ed., *Pattern Poetry*, pt. 1 (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1926); and Richard Wilson, ed., *Nelson's Literature Practice*, pt. 4, *Non-story Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1931).

<sup>21</sup> Miles, *Brave Young Singers*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> J. K. Ewers, "Verse-Writing in Schools," *W.A. Teachers' Journal*, January 10, 1930, 216.

see it encouraged and a fear that to do so will be to debase it. He was also troubled by what he felt to be an internal contradiction brought about by any practice that compelled creative thought and that turned a free act into a compulsory activity.

Ewers's thoughts on the advisability of teaching creative writing had been caused by the recent visit to his school of a school inspector (probably J. A. Miles himself), who had asked his students if any of them had ever written a poem. It is evident from Ewers's article that this was something of an embarrassing question, as they all answered emphatically that they had not. But the question had an immediate effect, and Ewers marveled, invoking a topical metaphor, how it "was merely a grain of suggestion thrown broadcast to my class by the Inspector that wakened the latent desire to write verse":

the very next day a girl brought along two stanzas that she had done. They leaned heavily on Kendall, whom the class had met that month in "Bellbirds" and "September in Australia." But they showed a grip of the technique of rhyme and rhythm which promised that, given the germ of an idea, this girl would really express herself well in verse. The subject was "Winter" and the first stanza ran:

Dreary Winter casts her shadows  
 On the meadows rich with corn;  
 Every street looks desolated  
 In the early hours of morn.<sup>23</sup>

Ewers makes no comment on the rather-plaintive character of his student's poem, with its drear and shadow and desolation. And whereas Kendall's "Bell-Birds" and "September in Australia" are about spring, the girl's poem is about winter, which also seems a significant departure. Perhaps the most striking thing of all is the way that the poem skillfully manages to capture the *emptiness* of a successful harvest. This comes about through the dissonance between the desolation of the streets and the gloom of winter and the "meadows rich with corn." Of course, subsequent stanzas may well come down on the side of the "gain" (i.e., the corn), but even so, the divorce the poem introduces between these two scenes—the human scene of the town and the (we are driven to this) inhuman scene of the "meadows"—can never now be fully repaired. The poem dares to voice the possibility that the fantasy of wheat is inadequate and that reaping the bounty from the soil does not ultimately eradicate the desolation that can still haunt us at moments.

Moreover, imprinted like a watermark on both Ewers's description ("grain," "broadcast," "germ") and the girl's poem ("rich with corn") is the image of the ripened grain. This image mobilizes the master metaphor of the Wheatbelt project, as we have already seen in Philbin's "Baby Plants" and Bland's "Almond Blossoms." These children's poems remind us that while there were certainly economic and material reasons for the clearing of the south west of the Australian continent for the cultivation of grain, at the level of human motivation it was driven by a strong pastoral impulse, a desire for nonalienated production that was answered by the call to pioneer the new wheatlands of Western Australia.

It is important to realize that the children writing these wheat poems were echoing—almost certainly unconsciously—a tradition of wheat poetry that flourished between the turn of the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

century and the onset of the Great Depression. These wheat poems were a quite specific literary phenomenon in Australia, even though a broader rural mythology was firmly entrenched in cultural production from the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the early twentieth-century wheat poems represented a significant departure from the idealized nomadic masculinity that reached its apogee in the so-called *Bulletin* school, named after the influential Australian weekly that nurtured the careers of canonical folk writers like Henry Lawson, A. B. “Banjo” Paterson, and Joseph Furphy in the decades either side of the Federation. The wheat farmer was a noticeably different figure from the shearers, drovers, and stockmen who roamed the works of the *Bulletin* school with a mixture of brooding and ebullience. The wheat farmer was a family man and was interested in bourgeois aspirations such as providing for his wife and securing a future for his children—he was what the *Bulletin* writers would call a “wowsler.” He hoped to build a future, improve the land, adopt the latest scientific agricultural methods, and take a pioneering place in an emerging rural society. So, it was a significant moment when these same *Bulletin* writers swung behind wheat farming. Banjo Paterson’s “Song of the Wheat” (1914) encapsulates this new turn.<sup>24</sup> The poem describes the dramatic transformation of the western plains of New South Wales from pastoral to crop use:

We have sung the song of the droving days,  
Of the march of the travelling sheep—  
How by silent stages and lonely ways  
Thin, white battalions creep.  
But the man who now by the soil would thrive  
Must his spurs to a ploughshare beat;  
And the bush bard, changing his tune, may strive  
To sing the song of the Wheat!

This “song of wheat” was a popular form throughout the early decades of the twentieth century (until the Depression, in fact), and it is perhaps not surprising to find that J. K. Ewers himself published a wheat poem in the *Bulletin* in 1927, titled “The Wheat Men.” The poem begins by acknowledging that the wheat “song” is not as celebrated as other forms of rural life and that the “wheat men” hunger for recognition of their labor and their calling:

There is no maiden. Our song  
Dies for the want of a lover—  
Dies like a wind in the wheat  
Dies at our feet.  
Nay, there is a lover. Her heart  
Pulses our own with its beat;  
We of the open spaces,  
We of the wheat!

But the poem, and the “wheat men” it valorizes, find endorsement from a surprising quarter—not from society at large but from the wheat itself, feminized as a lover. In other words, the wheat men are loved by wheat “maidens”—the lithe stalks of wheat bearing the precious fruit of their union, a consummation that is made explicit in the final stanza of Ewers’s poem:

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<sup>24</sup> The poem first appeared in *Lone Hand* 15, no. 91 (November 2, 1914): 403, and was republished as the opening poem in his volume *“Saltbush Bill, J. P.” and Other Verses* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1917), 3–5.

The virgin of slenderest grace  
 Dances, the wind for her music;  
 Lo! Like a fay at our feet  
     Dances the wheat!  
 Mellows the sun, and maturing,  
 Pour us the offering sweet;  
 We shall be loved in the evening,  
     We of the wheat!

It is interesting that Ewers, who initially resisted teaching poetry to his students, was one of the few teachers in the Wheatbelt who was actually publishing poems and, indeed, publishing them about the Wheatbelt. More than this, the effect of Ewers's poem coincides quite closely to that in the children's verse. Each represents the Wheatbelt in terms of subjective fulfillment. Philbin's "Baby Plants" sees the wheat fields in the way a small child might imagine "growing up." Bland's "Almond Blossoms," a more mature work it must be said, makes use of the conceit of the almond tree to correlate reproductive womanhood with the work in the fields beyond. And Ewers's poem "The Wheat Men" fantasizes a romantic union between the men in the fields and the wheat itself (transposed as "maiden," "virgin," and "fay"). The figure of Ewers, who can lay a unique claim—at least in this era—to both writing poetry about the Wheatbelt and teaching poetry to children in the Wheatbelt, allows us to see the circuitry of ideological identification at work in pedagogy. It shows us very clearly how this pedagogy—the one we have deemed New Education—can mobilize, adapt, and serve the specific goals of capitalist enterprise.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this brief investigation has been to open up the relationship that exists between material factors that led to the "development" of the Wheatbelt and the imaginative apparatus that made participation in this arduous work possible at a human level. In the capitalist era, it is the work of ideology to convert material demands into personal practices that are experienced as the fulfillment of individual wishes. The connotations that now supersaturate the idea of the "West" in so many diverse geographical situations—from Argentina to China, from Italy to India—evidence the cultural ingenuity that attends the demand to develop "new," previously "wild" lands and allow for an endlessly reworked narrative in which the world is being pioneered in such a way that it falls within the exact demands of industrial capital. This is what, in essence, the "West" means when we speak in terms of our project to compare popular "Wests."

By studying the poems written by the children of wheat farmers in southwestern Australia between the two world wars, a small but telling window is opened to the work of a capitalist world-culture that is remaking the earth's surface to meet its demands. These little poems, so simple on their face, need only the slightest of taps to split along their ideological seams and show that the stitching together of the imperatives of capitalist culture begins at the earliest point of subjective literacy. The poems take place at the interface between a young child's most intimate existential quandaries (What is the world for? What is my place in it? Where do things go when they die?) and the material transformation of the earth in the image of capital. A