

Gender and Nation: A Feminist Reading of Banjo Paterson and Dorothea Mackellar

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Abstract

This paper examines the gendered construction of Australian national identity through a feminist reading of Banjo Paterson's 'We're All Australians Now' and Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country.' While Paterson's poem envisions nationhood through masculine sacrifice, unity, and martial valor, Mackellar's poem locates national identity in a feminine attachment to landscape, endurance, and affect. The analysis situates these poems in their cultural context, highlighting how they represent divergent yet complementary strands of early twentieth-century national discourse. Using feminist and ecofeminist theory, the paper argues that Paterson's masculinist nationalism and Mackellar's feminine nationalism together illuminate the complex interplay of gender in shaping cultural identity in Australia. This dialogue between masculine and feminine articulations provides insight into both the inclusions and exclusions of early Australian nation-making.

Keywords: *Gender, Nationalism, Australian Poetry, Feminism, Landscape*

Introduction

The early decades of the twentieth century were crucial in the shaping of Australian cultural identity. Federation in 1901 brought together the colonies into a Commonwealth, and within a short span of time, the search for a unified national voice began to be reflected in literature. Among the poets who contributed to this process, Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson (1864–1941) and Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar (1885–

1968) hold a central position. Paterson, already celebrated for his ballads of bush life such as 'Man from Snowy River' (1895) and 'Clancy of the Overflow' (1889), turned in his later work toward themes of national pride and collective belonging. Mackellar, in contrast, gained recognition for her enduring lyric 'My Country' (first published in 1908), which continues to be considered a quintessential expression of Australian attachment to the land.

Although both poets write within the framework of nationalism, their perspectives diverge in significant ways. Paterson's 'We're All Australians Now' (1915) articulates a vision of the nation that is built upon collective masculine effort, martial valor, and the sacrifice of young men in service to the greater whole. Mackellar's 'My Country,' on the other hand, presents a deeply personal and gendered articulation of belonging, emphasizing emotional and embodied connections to the natural environment. The juxtaposition of these two works opens up fertile ground for feminist literary analysis, allowing us to ask: how do gendered perspectives shape the construction of national identity in early Australian poetry?

This paper argues that Paterson's poem establishes nationhood as a masculine project tied to war and struggle, while Mackellar's poem presents a feminine vision of the nation, rooted in landscape, resilience, and affect. By analyzing these poems structurally and thematically, and situating them in their literary and cultural contexts, we can see how gendered voices were instrumental in creating divergent but complementary narratives of Australian national identity.

Nationalism and Literary Context in Early Twentieth-Century Australia

The early twentieth century was marked by attempts to define what it meant to be Australian. Literature provided one of the most effective vehicles for this national self-definition. Paterson, as a bush balladeer, had long contributed to the mythologizing of rural Australia as the true site of national character. His later patriotic verse continued this tradition by emphasizing collective unity, physical toughness, and loyalty. These values resonated with the broader cultural currents that equated masculinity with national progress.

Dorothea Mackellar, by contrast, entered the literary scene as a young woman from a privileged background who nonetheless felt compelled to counter prevailing Eurocentric visions of landscape. While much poetry of her time idealized English pastoral imagery, Mackellar insisted on representing the uniqueness of the Australian environment. Her insistence on the harsh beauty of droughts, floods, and burning plains challenged both imported aesthetics and gender expectations. Rather than engaging in explicitly political discourse, she articulated a more intimate, affective vision of nationhood that was nonetheless deeply political in its implications.

This literary moment highlights the intersection of gender and nation in striking ways. As feminist theorists such as Nira Yuval-Davis have argued, women often serve as symbolic bearers of the nation, embodying its continuity, traditions, and boundaries (Yuval-Davis 45). At the same time, women writers like Mackellar could disrupt this passive role by asserting their own voices in the creation of national identity. Reading Paterson and Mackellar together thus reveals not only the gendered nature of national discourse but also the tensions between masculine and feminine articulations of belonging.

Banjo Paterson's 'We're All Australians Now'

Paterson's 'We're All Australians Now' is structured as a ballad, consistent with his characteristic style. Its rhyming quatrains and regular rhythm create a sense of marching cadence, appropriate for a poem celebrating national resolve. The poem begins with the collective 'Australia takes her pen in hand / To write a line to you' (ll. 1-2), personifying the nation itself as the author of the message. The speaker positions himself as the voice of the nation, addressing 'you fellows' — the fighting men.

The central imagery of the poem revolves around masculine labor and martial effort. The 'shearing shed and cattle run' and the 'fisher-boys' who 'dropped sail and oar' (ll. 5-12) exemplify a rural, working-class masculinity that becomes redirected from labor to battle. The idea of solidarity is underscored in lines such as 'The old state jealousies of yore

/ Are dead as Pharaoh's sow' (ll. 17-18). Here, the masculine body becomes the symbol of national unity, dissolving regional differences.

Strikingly, women are absent from this national vision. The poem constructs the nation entirely through male figures: shearers, farmers' sons, fisher-boys, and miners. Their sacrifices are represented as the foundation of Australia's new history: 'We have, through what you boys have done, / A history of our own' (ll. 45-46). The collective 'we' is gendered male, excluding women's roles in sustaining the home front or contributing to national culture.

Structurally, the poem functions as propaganda, using repetition ('Fight on, fight on' [ll. 61-62]) and imperatives to inspire perseverance. Its tone is declarative and celebratory, affirming that 'Our old world differences are dead' (l. 49). The nation emerges through martial sacrifice and masculine solidarity, leaving little room for other voices.

Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country'

If Paterson's nation is forged in masculine battle, Mackellar's is created through feminine attachment to landscape. 'My Country' begins by acknowledging the traditional English pastoral imagery that shaped earlier poetry: 'The love of field and coppice, / Of green and shaded lanes, / Of ordered woods and gardens / Is running in your veins' (ll. 1-4). However, Mackellar rejects this imagery as alien to her own experience: 'I know but cannot share it, / My love is otherwise' (ll. 7-8).

This opening sets up a contrast between imported European aesthetics and Mackellar's distinctive love of Australia: 'I love a sunburnt country, / A land of sweeping plains, / Of ragged mountain ranges, / Of droughts and flooding rains' (ll. 13-16). Her descriptions combine beauty and terror, suggesting an ambivalent but passionate relationship with the land.

The poem's structure reinforces this intimate engagement. Its stanzas alternate between descriptions of harshness and renewal, death and regeneration: 'Her pitiless blue sky, / When sick at heart, around us, / We see the cattle die - / But then the grey clouds gather, / And we can bless again / The

steadily, soaking rain' (ll. 37–42). The rhythm of natural cycles becomes a metaphor for endurance, resilience, and emotional investment.

Unlike Paterson, Mackellar centers subjectivity and affect. She repeatedly declares 'Core of my heart, my country!' (ll. 33, 45), emphasizing personal emotion as the basis of national belonging. Her insistence that 'All you who have not loved her, / You will not understand' (ll. 55–56) constructs a boundary of inclusion and exclusion, but one based on love and emotional connection rather than bloodshed.

Comparative Discussion

The contrast between Paterson and Mackellar highlights the gendered bifurcation of national discourse. Paterson's poem, with its emphasis on masculine labor and sacrifice, constructs the nation through collective action and martial endurance. Women are absent from his framework, their contributions silenced in favor of heroic male figures. Mackellar's poem, by contrast, positions feminine subjectivity at the center of the national narrative, making emotional attachment to the land the primary marker of belonging.

Structurally, the two poems also diverge. Paterson's ballad form and direct address make his work propagandistic, meant for public consumption and national mobilization. Mackellar's more lyrical form, with its refrain 'Core of my heart, my country,' foregrounds the interior, private dimensions of nationalism. Both forms, however, contribute to constructing a sense of collective identity: one through public exhortation, the other through intimate resonance.

Theoretical Engagement

Feminist theorists have long pointed out the gendered dynamics of nationalism. Anne McClintock observes that 'all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous' (McClintock 355). Paterson's poem exemplifies this danger by equating national identity with martial masculinity, leaving no room for women or alternative identities. His vision reinforces patriarchal dominance by coding national belonging as male.

Nira Yuval-Davis highlights how women are often constructed as symbolic reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 45). Mackellar's poem challenges this by moving from symbolism to authorship. She does not merely embody the nation but actively defines it through her voice. Her relationship with the land resonates with ecofeminist thought, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of women and nature in systems of oppression and resistance (Gaard 13).

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of Banjo Paterson's 'We're All Australians Now' and Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country' illuminates the gendered construction of nationalism in early twentieth-century Australia. Paterson's masculine nation is forged in sacrifice, labor, and martial unity, while Mackellar's feminine nation emerges through attachment to landscape, endurance, and emotion. Together, they reflect the complex interplay of gender in shaping cultural identity.

Through close textual analysis and feminist theoretical engagement, it becomes evident that national identity in Australia was not a singular narrative but a dialogue between masculine and feminine articulations. Recognizing these dual strands enriches our understanding of how literature both reflected and shaped the cultural imagination of the time. Moreover, it allows contemporary readers to question exclusionary models of nationhood and to appreciate the diversity of voices — male and female — that contributed to the making of 'Australia.'

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