Reflections on Australian Children's Literature: An Interview with Maurice Saxby

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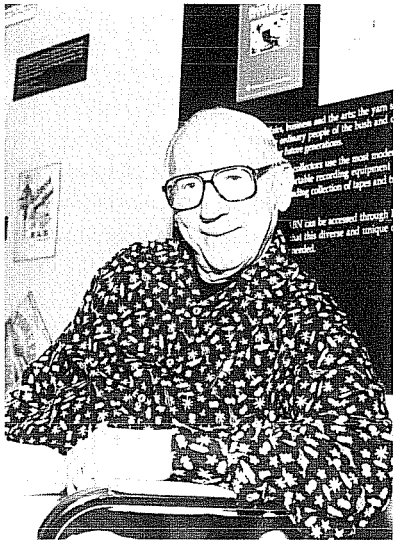

Maurice Saxby

Résumé: *Fondé sur une série d'échanges avec l'auteur, le présent article étudie la vie et l'oeuvre de Henry Maurice Saxby, l'un des écrivains les plus importants de la littérature pour la jeunesse australienne. L'article met en relief les influences qui l'ont marqué dans sa jeunesse et qui ont inspiré les thèmes et les motifs de son oeuvre littéraire. Des remarques sur sa recherche universitaire et sur la production littéraire pour la jeunesse en Australie complètent cet article, qui se termine avec une bibliographie détaillée de ses écrits.*

Summary: *Based primarily on an extended interchange with its subject, this article outlines the life and work of Henry Maurice Saxby, one of the key figures in Australian children's literature and its study. The discussion emphasizes Dr. Saxby's formative influences and outlines significant themes and patterns established in his child-*

hood, which have shaped his life's work. A consideration of his contributions to the history and criticism as well as to popular appreciation of Australian children's literature is included along with an extensive (though not authoritative) bibliography of his writings.

Maurice (Maurie) Saxby is one of the most prominent figures in the world of children's literature and its study in Australia. As a teacher, library adviser, academic, writer, conference organizer, book juror, and active member of significant organizations, Mr. Saxby has exerted a major influence over children's books in the Antipodes. He was the first national president of the Children's Book Council of Australia and has promoted the academic study of children's literature in virtually all ways possible. He himself has produced some of that literature along with key studies and collections pertaining to the history and interpretation of children's literature. Widely considered the patriarch of the nation's studies in children's literature, Maurice Saxby was awarded the second annual Dromkeen medal in recognition of his outstanding individual contribution to Australian children's literature. He has also received the Order of Australia for his invaluable and multifaceted service to his country through its children and their literature.

While a Harold L. White Fellow at the National Library of Australia, I was commissioned to interview Maurice Saxby for the Library's Eminent Australian series in its Oral History Collection. Mr. Saxby was a most willing informant: a compact man with a resonant voice, an engaging manner, and ready humour, he is also very articulate, outspoken, and blessed with an acute, highly visual memory. Best of all for the sake of an interview, he is a practiced speaker and born raconteur whose thoughts flow from his lips well shaped and powerful. We conversed easily and communicated well throughout two sessions of two hours, which seemed to pass exceedingly quickly. The interview took place in the state-of-the-art recording studio at the NLA on 4 September 2000. It is has been transcribed and can be accessed through the Oral History and Folklore Collection of the Library.[1]

What follows comprises excerpts from the interview transcript supplemented with information garnered from numerous biographical sketches, *Who's Who* entries, and Mr. Saxby's résumé. Further insightful snippets derive from our subsequent conversations that took place at his home in East Roseville at the beginning of October 2000 as we watched the closing ceremonies of the Sydney Olympics together.

Maurice was born on 26 December 1924 in Sydney where he spent his initial few years surrounded by a considerable extended family. His earliest memory involves books, which he describes beginning with

> a mental image of myself in a cot. The sides of the cot were down. My

> mother was beside the cot and there was a book in the cot.... I probably would have only been preschool well and truly. My mother at that time used to share books. I was the first child...so she had the time to spend with me. I have several books at home which date from that period and I could quote you even now: 'Jenny dropped her needle book / Into a pot of cream / Now all the little butter pats / Have learned to sew a seam....' They were, by today's standards, fairly corny types of books. Some of the verse was quite good. But I guess I learned those stories off by heart.

His mother introduced Maurice to oral literature as well, so that by the time he went to school he had memorized most of the best-known nursery rhymes and he was, in his own words, "a committed reader." His "real reading" began soon after when the Saxby family fortuitously moved to the only town outside Sydney that had a public library, the mining centre of Broken Hill. There Maurice had "a fantastic teacher," one of several for whom he benefited significantly and whom he remembers with gratitude. This teacher regularly read aloud to his students and urged them to join the library:

> all the books were on the shelf covered in funereal black oilcloth, with the title and the author in white lettering on the spine. It was a fairly gloomy room, as I remember, with brown linoleum on the floor. The librarian, I think, was a bit of a Gorgon. I don't think she really liked little boys [in] her library. In those days in Broken Hill Friday night was late shopping night. They'd close [the main street] to traffic and all the adults would perambulate and talk and while that was going on I'd go up to the library. I can remember one particular night, I'd been working my way down the shelves, not reading each book at a time but picking out a title which appealed to me. On the bottom shelf — my little grey trousers were polishing the brown linoleum — there was a book [which caught my attention] and I thought, 'That's the book that I'll take home for this week.' So it was Friday night, didn't have any time to open the book that night. The next morning, Saturday — Broken Hill's a very hot place and we had a veranda which had a grape trellis and underneath that grape trellis in the shade there was a lumpy old sofa and I used to lie tummy down and read. So I started the book that I had borrowed from the library. I'd only read a few pages when something began to happen. I could feel almost as though there was a hand on my spine and shivers were running up and down my spine and I was in Bristol on a wet, cold, foggy morning and I was Jim Hawkins, because the book was *Treasure Island*. When old Blind Pugh came tap, tap, tapping up to the Benbow Inn and he held out his hand and Jim Hawkins grabbed it, it was my hand that was being grabbed. That was, I suppose, my awakening to the power of literature.

Young Maurice had another guide to literature in Broken Hill — his

uncle, also named Maurice and the headmaster of a school:

> I can still see in my mind's eye across a shelf on top of his piano there was a set of books. They were blue with gold lettering on the spine and they were hero tales, wonder tales, folktales, fairy tales, and poetry. He would allow me to borrow one of these volumes, but only one at a time. He wasn't being pedantic, he wasn't even being strict, but he would question me when I returned the book before he'd give me another one. But I read my way through all those folktales and that was my beginning of interest in folk literature, fairy tale.

His uncle was questioning Maurice, as he says, "just to tell him something about the book, which story did I like best. I think he was really checking to see that I was reading the books and not just borrowing them and bringing them back."

And this while he was only in early primary school. He read voraciously, eclectically — "it was a very catholic reading" — and with intensity: "I've recently had to review a new edition of *Alice in Wonderland* with Anthony Brown's illustrations. So I pulled out my old...copy of *Alice in Wonderland* and, as I was going through it, there was a picture of the duchess with the baby. The duchess's face had been scratched out and I can remember doing it. I was so involved in the book that I hated that woman because she was so cruel to the baby and I scratched her."

Maurice may state that his "was a pretty typical boyhood reading," but he was not like "a lot of the other kids in the class [who] of course couldn't have cared less": from early on, Maurice was truly a reader — he read for pleasure and, when unhappy, he "found refuge in books." He also had intimate experience of oral narration through which he developed a deeply personal appreciation for the power of story:

> I had an aunt on my father's side who worked at the Mitchell Library, the state library...in Sydney. She used to not only read to me but she would tell me stories. I can remember her telling me the story of Enoch Arden, one of the great stories from the poets.

And there were family stories:

> I used to pester my aunts and uncles and Mum and Dad, but aunts and uncles more than Mum and Dad, I think, and my grandmother on my mother's side to tell us about when this happened and what happened when you were young.... [M]y paternal grandfather, whom I didn't particularly love but I respected, used to tell me, he'd sit me on his knee and he'd tell me the story of how he saved the firm's takings from a highwayman. He was the manager of Enoch Taylor's boot factory and he used to go every Friday to collect the pay, which was in the form of

> gold sovereigns which were in a bag, a valise.... He was walking through what was called Burns's Bush to go back to the factory with all this money when a highwayman came along on a horse: 'Stand and deliver.' My grandfather whacked the bag of sovereigns and knocked the fellow flying, I think, or he galloped off anyway. Then my grandfather would pull out of his fob pocket a gold watch, which I still have, and there was a sovereign case attached to it and he would click open the sovereign case and there would be one of the sovereigns which had been preserved from the robbery. The watch is inscribed 'To Joseph Henry Saxby, in admiration for his courage in saving the firm's payroll,' or something like that, you know. So that was oral history, I guess, and storytelling within the family.

There were, then, significant themes and patterns established in Maurice Saxby's childhood which were to persist over the years, shaping the direction of his life and work as definitively as recurring motifs direct traditional tales. These patterns include respect for teaching as well as learning; understanding of literature as a consequential presence in a child's life; an appreciation for the value of libraries; recognition of the importance of stories; and a focus on traditional narratives.

Following his schooling, Maurice served five years in the army during the war in the Pacific; afterwards, he tried to pursue journalism but met with little success. Associates urged him to apply for teachers college, something he had never really considered. Not only was he accepted, but he had also found his calling: during his training, which he describes as "two of the happiest, most fulfilling years of my life," he was profoundly affected by several educators, starting with the principal "who believed in the power of literature and we did more literature than any other teachers college at the time and I think since." This experience confirmed Maurice Saxby's conviction that all literature — from children's through adult literature — was "a progression and part of a whole." Concurrently, his study with a teacher librarian sparked a critical appreciation for children's literature:

> She believed that all teachers should have some idea of the use of a library in education. So we [learned] what she called library method. But into that she slipped little bits about children's literature and introduced us to John Newbery and *A Little Pretty Pocketbook* and so on. So for the first time I became aware of the fact there was such a thing as a children's literature as opposed to adult literature.

Then there was "an outstanding lecturer" who inspired him to further study:

> I was right down in the front table in the row and he was just standing out there talking [about literature]. Suddenly I thought to myself, 'This guy's being paid to do this. That's what I want. If only I could be a

college lecturer in English, then I would be happy....' So I knew that I would have to do a university course after I finished.

Upon graduation from Balmain College, the serendipity that was to blanket Maurice's career saw him specifically chosen for a primary school located convenient to Sydney University, enabling him to complete an Honours BA in English at night:

> [The headmaster] had asked for me because he knew that I was interested in reading and he wanted to start a school library. So I went to teach grade three and in my spare time — I even went back in the school holidays — got together all the books around the place, had a little bit of money to spend, and we set up a school library. Looking back on that year, it was one of the most valuable years of my teaching career, because I had these lovely little kids, they were all great kids. I would tell them stories, I'd read to them, I'd get them reading, I'd get them to talk about what they were reading and...that's when I started to learn about Australian literature.

This success prompted the Director of Primary Education to offer the enterprising Mr. Saxby a position as a teacher librarian at a demonstration school to which "students from the [teachers'] colleges would come and sit in on your lessons." Here he had the opportunity to help establish a library for the infants [preschool to kindergarten] department:

> I think that's when I developed my ability to tell stories. We had demonstration lessons where I would tell stories and then get kids talking about the books that they would read. I can remember one demonstration lesson getting the children to talk and one of them was talking about brontosauruses. So I said, for the students' benefit, 'Well, could you tell us, you know, what a brontosaurus is really?' He looked at me: 'Mr. Saxby,' he said, 'Don't you know? They're extinct animals.' The students all thought, 'Oh, this is a put-up job.' But that was a great experience.

Next, Maurice took an overseas leave during which he studied children's literature and librarianship in England, which gave him an "entrée to schools and library systems and so on." He also had opportunity to visit schools in Northern Ireland and "an excuse to travel on the continent and go to libraries like the Vatican Library."

Upon returning to Australia, he spent a year teaching high school English (which he thoroughly enjoyed) and running a library, which gave him "the opportunity to use story and children's literature with the younger students particularly." He moved on the following year to Newcastle Teachers College where his main teaching involved how to teach English in the

primary school:

> I could not see any point whatsoever in giving them lectures on look and say method as opposed to phonics method and the eclectic methods of teaching reading if they didn't get kids reading. So I started sneaking in little bits about children's books...so that was really the beginning of my involvement at an academic level with children's literature.

At this point he began lecturing on children's literature — first in a course offered at Newcastle by the officer in charge of the School Library Service of the Department of Education, then shortly thereafter in the position of Adviser to the School Library Service. The depth of his commitment to his work, especially to promoting literature in Australian children's lives, is obvious from actions at this time:

> while I was at the school library service I felt that I was being condescended to by the real librarians because I was not library trained. So I just enrolled and didn't go to lectures or anything, I did the qualifying and then the registration certificates on my own and became a qualified librarian. So, because of that they got me lecturing to...students in children's literature. So people like Margaret Hamilton, who...became Margaret Hamilton Books, was one of my students. She always says, 'Maurie Saxby taught me about children's literature.'

It was only a short time, though, before he applied to return to his true vocation: "I started at Alexander Mackie in 1958, when the college only just started. I was one of the early lecturers in English and...my career as a lecturer was underway." It was while at this college that Maurice began work on his Master's degree. The idea had risen somewhat earlier when the librarian at Sydney Teachers College heard him speak on children's books and the power of the imagination through literature:

> 'You know, Maurice,' she said, 'Somebody should write a history of Australian children's books,' because by this time I'd become aware of an Australian literature for children. Not extensive, but it was there. She said, 'I think that ought to be you.'

The Professor of English at Sydney University accepted the topic when Maurice first suggested it, but he was unable to proceed owing to the demands of his first lecturing position. By the time he returned to the idea the new Professor was less encouraging: "he just looked at me and said, 'A bit thin, Mr. Saxby, a bit thin.' He was not at all impressed." Consequently, Maurice turned to the education faculty where he was met with enthusiasm:

> So I had the approval to do a history of Australian children's literature as

an M.Ed., which meant that I had to do a couple of qualifying courses, so that took a couple of years. But it was good because I did clinical psychology and the history of Australian education and so on...by this time I was at Mackie lecturing.

Maurice faced a daunting task, as there was a dearth of resources on his subject:

> My first thing was to go to the Mitchell Library [at the State Library of New South Wales] in Sydney. They had a catalogue drawer with a label 'Children's Books' in alphabetical order and if there wasn't an author it would be under the title, but there was nothing much more.... I used to go in the night time, after I'd been lecturing all day, or go in at the breaks.... I knew by this time that the very first book to be written and published in Australia...for children was 1841 and it was *A Mother's Offering to her Children* by a Lady Long Resident in the Colony. So I had sheets of paper from 1841, 1842 through, and I thought, 'I'll do the first hundred years from 1841 to 1941.' So as I worked my way through the catalogue drawers, [I] would enter the name of the book under the appropriate year and make notes about the content of the book and sometimes copy out pieces. So I worked my way through the holdings of the Mitchell Library.

He may not claim to have read "every word in every book," but he read Australian literature for children to that point as no one else had ever done or, perhaps, has quite done since owing to the book he produced. As well as the works in the Mitchell Library, his reading encompassed his mother's considerable collection. Maurice recalls:

> A pattern began to form. But I knew I should investigate further.... Somebody said, 'You should contact the National Library. There's a girl down there, she's the children's librarian, and her name is Joyce Boniwell.

Maurice did meet (and subsequently marry) Joyce Boniwell. During college holidays, he went to Canberra where he had to sift through the entire fiction collection because there was no catalogue of children's holdings:

> It was fascinating in a way because I'd go along the shelf and I'd think, 'That looks like a children's book.' So again, it comes back to what makes a children's book and what makes an adult book. Some of the books which I've classified as a children's book — say, Marjorie Barnard's *The Ivory* [*Gate*] — I don't think Marcie Muir[2] really regards as a children's book. But I could see its value for children. So I suppose I made arbitrary decisions on this....

As Maurice began to write his thesis, his new wife was offered the

position of children's editor for Angus and Robertson, becoming the first children's editor in Australia. Unfortunately, the marriage was fairly short-lived owing to Joyce's death, but Maurice persisted with his work, which he found somewhat therapeutic. He "tried to line up what was happening in Australian children's literature with children's literature trends generally and...learned a great deal." The proprietor of Wentworth Press met Maurice socially and offered to publish the work upon its completion. Maurice edited the finished thesis, pruning "appendices looking at how Australian children's books had been introduced through the school magazine, through education gazettes and so on," and *A History of Australian Children's Literature 1841 to 1941* appeared in 1966. With this seminal work, Maurice secured his position as a leading authority on Australian children's literature and registered his promise as a world authority on children's literature. His subsequent studies, *A History of Australian Children's Literature 1941-1970* (1971) and *The Proof of the Puddin': Australian Children's Literature 1970-1990* (1993), complemented the first volume to make a three-volume history of the field to 1990. Maurice felt compelled, though, to rework the first volume completely owing to intervening scholarship and advances in library cataloguing and collection, which his original work had played no small role in stimulating. The revised study, *Offered to Children: Australian Children's Literature 1841-1941*, was published by Scholastic Australia in 1998.

The pattern Maurice Saxby discerned in Australian children's literature in its first one hundred years involved

> ...a gradual shift in some important perspectives, such as:
>
> – a changing relationship with the land itself
>
> – changes in the structure of society and the growth of a national identity
>
> – changes in the implied reader in terms of language used, mode of discourse and authorial tone; and accompanying changes in the physical format and appearance of the books themselves. (*Offered to Children* 18)

He expanded upon these perspectives in our discussion:

> I could see, when I came to do *Offered to Children*, that...as with adult literature there was a changing relationship with the land in that the early books reflected the English attitude to the landscape, and also the land itself was the enemy. There was a gradual appreciation of the environment... conservation wasn't unknown right back in the nineteenth century but, nevertheless, as a general theme you get the land being tamed and being conserved and the family story changes too, and certainly the implied readership.... There's been a gradual lightening up, if you like, of the bulk of the books and the demands of the language.

This shifting perspective on and relationship with the land is central to Rosemary Ross Johnston's discussion earlier in this issue of children's literature and a phenomenology of landscape. In "The Sense of 'Before-Us': Landscape and the Making of Mindscapes in Recent Australian Children's Books," Johnston discusses in detail four recent works that represent ways in which human (and/or animal) relationships with Australian landscape/time are constructed. One of these works, *A is for Aunty*, further represents the relatively recent shifts in social perception and literary presentation of the Australian Aboriginal peoples. Clare Bradford's article "'Worth in the Telling': Tales of Trauma in Australian Aboriginal Narratives," also in this issue, clearly represents these transformations in that the four contemporary texts she examines are by Aboriginal authors, yet they utilize Western and Aboriginal narrative traditions and target both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. As Maurice Saxby notes, true Aboriginal voices were not present in books for children until the 1970s when Collins Australia, under the insightful guidance of Anne Bower Ingram, began publishing "the Dick Roughsey books,[3] which [were] the beginning really of the use of Aboriginal characters themselves [and] Aboriginal people in doing work." In her study, Bradford concentrates on Australian cultural politics while noting the ambivalence inherent in the hybrid nature of postcolonial texts.

Maurice comments further on the representation of aboriginality in Australian children's literature with reference to *The Millenium Book of Myth and Story* (1997), which he considers to be the most handsome of all his publications:

> I wanted it to be thematic and multicultural, looking at stories from across the world and that meant including some stories of aboriginal origin. I was fairly careful because by this time we were alerted to the fact that you needed to not retell stories which were sacred in any way but secular stories, so I made sure that I took stories which had common currency in the same way as the Greek stories would have. I made sure that I went to more than one version and did my own retelling. Well, when the book was entered in the Children's Book of the Year competition it didn't even make first base despite, as one person said, 'Blind Freddie could see that it was a notable book.' Because one of the judges was very emphatic that it wasn't what she called 'culturally specific' in that she was arguing that if you were going to use an Aboriginal story then it should be an Aboriginal reteller and it should be from the actual given tribal group source. Whereas I'd taken them as I'd taken the Greek stories, the Roman stories, the American Indian stories and so on, from printed sources.

The restriction on non-Aboriginals to retell only secular stories is one that developed out of the 1978 conference "Through Folklore to Literature" organized for IBBY Australia. At this gathering, Patricia Wrightson gave a

presentation titled "When Cultures Meet: A Writer's Response," in which she addressed her use of aboriginal folklore with specific reference to her book *An Older Kind of Magic* (1972). She argued for the right of as well as the necessity for non-Aboriginal Australian writers to incorporate in their work truly Australian spirits — "kindly, fearsome, poetic, beastly or elemental — of the on-going, free-ranging, non-sacred type" (202). This approach to Aboriginal traditions continues today, despite the appearance of restrictive attitudes regarding appropriation of voice as mentioned above.

Maurice's commentary as well as his published criticism is refreshing: it is frank and to the point, yet his opinion is held to be informed and judicious. For instance, when introducing his discussion of the 1970-1990 period in *The Proof of the Puddin'* (1992), he states flatly:

> For although this might well be the 'golden age' of Australian children's books, there have still been far too many mediocre books published: indifferently written, badly illustrated, and poorly designed. (1)

Similarly, toward the end of our discussion, Maurice commented on contemporary publishing for children:

> maybe it's coming not only in Australia but in other countries as well. A commonality, universality not in the sense of there are great enduring themes but the Coca Colarization, if you like, of the world, the McDonald's syndrome. The books are all looking the same. They're all having similar kinds of themes and approaches and, quite frankly, a lot of the young adult material that I've seen in Australia in the last couple of years I think will only last the length of the run of that particular print and that'll be it.

Such forthright honesty makes reading or conversing with Maurice both engaging and fulfilling. It is small wonder that, from his early classroom experiences to his retirement as Head of the English Department at Kuringgai College of Advanced Education, he was considered an outstanding teacher, revered by many of his legions of students.

In the effort to promote children's reading, Maurice has assisted in the preparation of a series of readers for primary grades and another for secondary grades. For teachers he has written works to assist them in using literature in the classroom, such as *Children's Literature: What to Look For in a Primary Reading Program* (1994) and *Books in the Life of a Child: Bridges to Literature and Learning* (1997). Further, he has produced guides for parents and others striving to provide children with the best childhood experiences of literature, for instance, *First Choice: A Guide to the Best Books for Australian Children*, with Glenys Smith (1991); *Give Them Wings: The Experience of Children's Literature*, with Gordon Winch (1991); and *Puffins for Parents: For Par-*

ents and Teachers, A Guide Book, The Best in Children's Reading (1993). He has also created significant and engaging works for children themselves, designed to expose them to the greatness of literature as well as to the pleasures to be derived from it. His books for children include *The Great Deeds of Superheroes* (1989) balanced by *The Great Deeds of Heroic Women* (1990); such popular favourites as *The All Over Australia Joke Book* (1989) and its companion *The All Over Australia Riddle Book* (1989); and a storybook based on a family tale, *Russell and the Star Shell* (1990).

Maurice's influence persists through his publications and extends from one generation to the next through the teachers, parents and children whom he has taught. Meanwhile, Maurice himself continues to learn. At the time of our interview, he was almost seventy-six, yet he was in the midst of a new study that was to become not only his latest book but also his doctoral dissertation. This work, *Images of Australia: A History of Children's Literature 1941-1970* (2002) pertains to the role of children's literature in constructing Australian identity. Speaking about his research for this study, Maurice said:

> what we read can contribute to our sense of national identity, who we are as Australians. That, of course is contributing to our sense of personal identity, who we are as a person, who I am as Maurice Saxby, who I am as Maurice Saxby, an Australian. So when I read *Treasure Island*, for instance, as a kid I see myself in the role of Jim Hawkins and I learn a bit about myself. But when I read Ethel Turner, or the Billabong books particularly as I read them, I see myself as an Australian and the forces around me.

Maurice Saxby has led many Australians to know themselves better through books. He has exerted an astounding influence throughout Australia and beyond as a champion of books in children's lives. His critical writings are of particular value to foreign scholars as they offer rich and immediate access to the highly developed and acclaimed children's literature of Australia.

Notes

1 "Interview with Henry Maurice Saxby, academic and children's author" [sound recording]/interview, National Library of Australia, 2000. 4 sound discs (CD) (ca. 296 minutes) + transcript (85 leaves). Reference number TRC 4617. The address for the National Library is Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia; its website is http://www.nla.gov.au, and the e-mail address of the Oral History and Folklore Branch is oralhist@nla.gov.au. This article is published by permission of the National Library of Australia.

2 The compiler of *Australian Children's Books: A Bibliography* (Carlton South: U of Melbourne P, 1992), a standard reference in the field since its first publication in 1970.

3 An aboriginal writer famous for his children's works, commencing in 1973 with *The Giant Devil Dingo*. There are 32 titles under his name in the National Library of Australia, a number of which he wrote and illustrated with others, especially Percy Trezise, e.g. *The Quinkins* (1978) and *The Magic Firesticks* (1983), Australian classics that are still in print today.

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Appendix: Maurice Saxby, A Bibliography

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