PREFACE

This book arose out of a range of interests that combined to move me in a direction I had not anticipated, but found intriguing. For nearly a decade I had spent time researching and writing about how curriculum materials in the form of school textbooks found their way into classrooms, as well as exploring their political and ideological construction. I was interested in how school history, social studies and citizenship textbooks help shape, and are, in turn, shaped by, ideological and socio-political norms, traditions and values. I combined this work with a lifelong interest in the history of education and its cultural and sociological origins. In 2013 I committed myself to moving beyond the analysis of school textbooks to exploring an alternative form of curriculum materials in the guise of early-twentieth-century children's magazines.

While I had no interest in being sucked into the often vacuous quagmire of postmodernist theoretical gymnastics, with its dreary and tiresome massacring of language, I was interested in how children's magazines were powerful weapons in the ideological and political construction of what of the past was remembered and how it was remembered. My interest lay in exploring how the narratives that constitute a nation's past present a powerful moral authority. I wanted to focus upon how they did not simply tell stories, but stories that contained discourses from which cultural and ideological meanings were manufactured.

Originally I concentrated upon a series of articles I wanted to write on the manner in which *The Children's Newspaper*, which Arthur Mee edited between 1919 and 1943, imagined English national identity, Australia and Aboriginal Australians. Reading through the weekly editions of the newspaper, it became clear that the stamp of Arthur Mee was writ large across its pages through his editorials, articles attributed to "A.M." and the general tone and character of the paper. I came to construct a picture of Arthur Mee and his values that prompted me to want to know more, but I found little outside his writings that helped answer my questions. A major exception was a single volume on Mee written in 1946 by his lifelong friend John Hammerton. More hagiography than anything else, it is, as

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Hammerton intended, not a conventional biography but a romanticised and entirely affirmative set of often sentimentalised recollections provided by Hammerton and some of Mee's close contemporaries.[1] A second helpful source was Maisie Robson's briefer account of Mee's life and career, *Arthur Mee's Dream of England*, published in 2003.[2]

Apart from these sources and in spite of the enormous appeal of his writing, which saw Mee become a household name and a major publishing brand, the man remained an almost ghostly figure. This seemed odd given that the publication most associated with Mee, *The Children's Encyclopaedia*, sold 1.5 million sets across the British Empire. The American edition known as *The Book of Knowledge* sold 3.5 million sets. Unique at the time of its publication, *The Children's Encyclopaedi*a was the early-twentieth-century equivalent of the internet and was translated into numerous languages.

What interested me was why, given Mee's widespread popularity, we knew so little of him, and why he could have told John Hammerton, "I know nothing about children."[3] Arthur Mee is now most often found on the shelves in second-hand book shops, at the back of a cupboard, in an attic or deep within adult memories of childhood. Often by accident or in the name of nostalgic remembering, his name occasionally steps out of the past into a present that would have horrified and delighted him. Mee did receive what some might consider the ultimate accolade when in an episode of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* he was the host of the "All-England Summarize Proust Competition". But apart from occasional reminiscences from those recreating afternoons of yesteryear spent mulling over copies of *The Children's Encyclopaedia*, the interests, crusades and accomplishments of Arthur Mee have faded.

Known and yet wholly unknown by the huge national and international audience that bought his titles simply because they carried his name, Mee revolutionised the home-school learning relationship. Among those he influenced was Enid Blyton, whose set of *The Children's Encyclopaedia* she read again and again. In 1911, aged fourteen, Blyton entered a poetry competition in *My Magazine*, one of Mee's publications. To her delight she received a letter from him saying he would publish the poem; the result was that Mee was included in her prayers each night.[4] As well as Blyton, others known to have read *The Children's Encyclopaedia* include C.P. Snow, William Golding, the molecular scientist Francis Crick, the wife of socialist politician G.D.H. Cole, Margaret Cole, the writer and polemicist Peter Hitchens, the author Alexander McCall Smith and the historian David Starkey.

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When John Hammerton discussed with Mee's wife Amy the possibility of writing a biography of her husband, he suggested calling the book *Child of Wonder: An Intimate Biography*. Amy's sister Lena Fratson is said

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by Hammerton to have liked the title because it described Mee perfectly. On his death Mee was described as a “Christian romantic”, a description Hammerton acknowledges as accurate.[5] Mee was certainly a romantic and his writing bears all the hallmarks of a romanticism which appealed to his love of childhood as a time of innocence and hope and his view of the world as a magical place of wonder and imagination. The audience who bought Mee’s publications believed they knew him personally and he encouraged the perception that he was a welcome and much anticipated friend who arrived fortnightly in hundreds of thousands of homes.

Mee was more than a strikingly popular editor and writer; for a generation of young readers and their parents, the name Arthur Mee meant something. For many in his audience, the narratives embedded within his writing legitimised a trinity of beliefs that for his generation lay at the heart of the national character: God, England and Empire. Aimed at appealing to the widest and most profitable readership, Mee’s writing for children had education, information and entertainment at its core. Bolstered by a strong nonconformist religious faith, he saw himself as being on a mission to shape the attitudes and values of his readers with respect to what was good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral, true and false. His writings were what in a different context Foucault has called practical texts, “written for the purpose of offering rules, opinions, and advice on how to behave as one should”.[6]

Mee lived through decades of unparalleled change. He witnessed the invention of the motor car and powered flight, the arrival of universal suffrage, the cinema, the “wireless” and BBC television, the jet engine and the radio telescope, Einstein’s theory of relativity, the splitting of the atom and the discovery of insulin. He was fascinated by it all, enthralled by the excitement of scientific and technological change, appalled by aspects of twentieth-century modernity and sickened by the tragedies of poverty and war. He was an eyewitness to the First World War, the 1926 General Strike, mass unemployment, deprivation, hardship and ignorance, the rise of Hitler and National Socialism, and the Second World War. Yet in spite of all this, it is difficult to turn the pages of an Arthur Mee publication without being constantly reminded of an unfaltering optimism that remained throughout his life a defining feature of his personality and temperament. Mee always managed to sustain the belief that no matter how bad the world might be, life was always gradually and continually improving.

Mee was an ardent and patriotic Englishman with a passionate and emotional devotion to the protection of the history, traditions and values of all things English. As his world changed around him, like many of his generation, he struggled to come to terms with how best to understand a new England that both energised and dismayed him while also protecting his England of tradition and Victorian values.

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Much of Mee's writing reveals an ideological and personal paradox experienced by many who lived through the decades when everything was exposed to the prospect of change. Mee always wrote and spoke of himself as a liberal and a radical one at that, and he was politically and economically libertarian in his distrust of government intervention in the lives of the people. He could be moderate and conservative, progressive and traditional. In his rhetorical attacks on poverty, ignorance and destitution, his writing reveals elements of Christian socialism. In other contexts he exhibited a strong thread of cultural conservatism borne of anxiety that his world of Victorian certainties faced crisis and extinction.

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During the writing of his biography of Mee, Hammerton claims to have had placed at his disposal his correspondence, papers and personal records. But there is little evidence of them within the book's pages, and Mee's personal voice is absent. However, Mee was never one to be silent, and in trying to reconstruct the story of his life this book draws upon three principle sources of evidence. First, approximately 700 letters written by Arthur Mee and members of his editorial staff to his lifelong friend, mentor and collaborator John Derry, held within the Reading University Library's Special Collections. The hand- and type-written letters cover the period 1905 to 1936 and focus upon a myriad of issues and themes. These include the contributions that Derry made to Mee's publications, exploring his thoughts and opinions on this work, political, cultural and social issues and more personal issues. Also included are letters written to Derry by members of Mee's staff, notably Stella Hancock, Margaret Lillie and Hugo Tyerman.

Second, letters between Mee and Alfred Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, held in the British Library manuscripts department. Mee went to work for Harmsworth in 1903 and the two enjoyed a long professional association. Covering the period 1904 to 1910, the letters reveal something of the relationship that Mee had with Harmsworth at a time when he was fast becoming the most powerful press baron in the country, as well as providing details on the early days of *The Children's Encyclopaedia*.

Third, extensive use has been made of Mee's publications. Across a career that spanned fifty years, Mee's output and range as an editor and author was prolific. Before the First World War he edited *Harmsworth's Self-Educator* (1905-1907); *Harmsworth's History of the World* (1907); *The Children's Encyclopaedia* (1909-1910); *The World's Great Books* (1909-1910); *Harmsworth's Natural History* (1910-1911); *Harmsworth's Popular Science* (1911-1913) and *The New Harmsworth's Self-Educator* (1913-1915). We can add to this list a re-issued part-publication of *The Children's Encyclopaedia* called *My Magazine* (1914-1933), and, after the First World War, *The Children's Newspaper* (1919-1964).

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In addition, Mee wrote and edited books on a variety of topics, read by children and adults. These include for children *Arthur Mee's Hero Book* (1921); *Arthur Mee's Children's Bible* (1924); *Arthur Mee's 1000 Heroes* (1933); *The Children's Shakespeare* (1933) and *Heroes of the Bible* (1936). Other of Mee's books for children set out a moral framework by which he thought they should live, including *Arthur Mee's Letters to Boys* (1913) and *Arthur Mee's Letters to Girls* (1915), re-published in 1920 and again in 1924 as *Arthur Mee's Talks to Girls* and *Arthur Mee's Talks to Boys.* A further topic for his pen was his fierce loyalty to England, expressed in books including *Arthur Mee's Gift Book for Boys and Girls Who Love the Flag* (1917), *Little Treasure Island: Her Story and Her Glory* (1920), *Arthur Mee's Wonderful Day* (1923) and *Arthur Mee's Book of Everlasting Things* (1927).

Mee's writing for an adult audience included his works for the temperance movement *Defeat or Victory?: The Strength of Britain Book* (1917), *The Fiddlers* (1917) and *The Parasite* (1918). Enormously popular was the Mee-edited *The King's England*, a series of books tracing the history and romance of individual English counties, the first of which, *Enchanted Island*, was published in 1936. During the early years of the Second World War he wrote a number of polemics lauding the nation's fight against what he described as un-Christian savagery and barbarism. These include *Why We Had to Go to War* (1939); *Arthur Mee's Blackout Book* (1939), full of stories, games and puzzles for children; the enormously popular *Arthur Mee's Book of the Flag* (1941); *Call the Witnesses* (1941); *1940: Our Finest Hour* (1941); *Immortal Dawn* (1942) and *Wonderful Year* (1943).

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In 1938 while attempting to write a biography of her friend Christopher Fry, Virginia Woolf is said to have exclaimed, "My God, how does one write a biography?" That question disturbs every biographer and few can claim to have got it completely right. I had to make decisions about how to shape the book and decided not to format it entirely in a chronological fashion; this would not have enabled me to investigate a number of themes that are important in understanding Mee and his work. I wanted to explore Mee within different contexts and to understand particular aspects of his life, values and views on the social and cultural politics of the time.

I have sought to adopt a quasi-chronological approach, employing a structure that Mee would have found familiar. When editing *The Children's Encyclopaedia* he decided that the traditional alphabetical approach to organising content was unlikely to provide his audience with a framework for learning that would generate interest or enthusiasm. The magazine's subject matter was divided into topics as a way of trying to express what Mee called "unity" by enabling readers to explore linked themes. This book has a similar structure, and while Chapter One and Chapter Two are broadly chronological, the remainder of the chapters are thematic and could be read as individual essays.

Chapter One follows Mee's life from his beginnings in Stapleford, Nottinghamshire, and contextualises his nonconformist background and school education before turning to the early days of his journalistic career in Nottingham and his move to London in 1897. Chapter Two chronicles his career as a London journalist working for Alfred Harmsworth. The chapter provides a sense of Mee as an individual through exploring the fundamentals of his personality and temperament. The intention of these chapters is to provide a narrative framework illustrating the formative years of Mee's life as he moved from being a fledging provincial writer of potential to occupy a place as one of the capital's most sought after and respected journalists.

The chapters that follow delve into aspects of Mee's life and work and are intended to examine in detail his character and the values and beliefs that drove him. Chapter Three focusses upon how Mee's journalistic career turned towards writing for children. Although forever interested in learning and self-improvement and in possession of what many regarded as a childlike imagination, Mee had not consciously thought of writing for children. But he found himself in the right place at the right time to take advantage of newly popularised theories concerning child development and how children learnt, which, with Harmsworth's backing, he exploited in *The Children's Encyclopaedia* and later within *The Children's Newspaper.* How these publications came into being, how Mee developed an approach to writing for children and who worked for Mee in their production lie at the core of this chapter.

Mee was born into a devoutly religious family, and an undiluted nonconformist faith and support for temperance remained central to his personality throughout his life. Chapter Four explores what Mee meant by religious faith, how important it was in his every thought and deed and how he made sense of it within the context of a belief in Darwinian evolutionary science. Like many of his generation, Mee was seduced by the arguments of eugenic theorising and was an avid supporter of eugenicist thinking on the "evils of drink" and arguments concerning the physical and moral degeneration of the English race, and the chapter explores his thinking on these issues.

Mee had a deep emotional attachment to England; he thought it the most culturally and economically superior nation on Earth that had for centuries been the focal point for global progress and civilisation. Chapter Five unpacks Mee's spiritual and at times mystical devotion to England, in particular his use of heroic narrative and how he symbolically romanticised the English landscape and his gardens as representative of all that was not only good about England and the English but all that was universally right.

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Mee lived to see two world wars, both of which provided him with contexts through which he could laud the English nation, and the chapter also explores his attitudes towards defending an England under threat during the First World War.

Central in Mee's life was his commitment to the British Empire as a force for universal good, and he was an unabashed, although not xenophobic, imperialist. He shared many of the views of the time on Social Darwinism, cultural racism and the status of indigenous populations within the Empire. Was Mee racist? Chapter Six explores how he viewed colonial nations as versions of a white England in other parts of the world and how through the pages of *The Children's Newspaper* Aboriginal Australians were constructed and portrayed.

Mee was a lifelong liberal with an unyielding commitment to individualism and freedom. Chapter Seven examines his campaigns against poverty and ignorance and his powerful reaction to the 1926 General Strike, within which elements of conservatism and socialism emerge. Although Mee was enthusiastic about embracing modernity in its technological and scientific guises, particular features of a rapidly changing nation left him frustrated and sometimes utterly bewildered. Chapter Eight explores his culturally conservative responses to the transformation of his "Old England" during the inter-war period. This includes his abhorrence of jazz, and his reactions to the cinema, what he considered the corruption of the English language and the impact of modernisation upon the English landscape.

Chapter Nine brings Mee's story to a conclusion by focussing upon the final years of his life. The 1930s and 1940s saw Mee experience what in his words was "A Heartbreaking World". It was a time when his dreams of an egalitarian world united against violence, ignorance and poverty were crushed by the onset of the Second World War. Yet it was a time when he remained typically at his most productive and optimistic. These final years saw him begin *The King's England* series, which he called "My England Book", and the writing of war diaries within the pages of *The Children's Newspaper*. The chapter explores how Mee fought the war at his desk with pen and ink as he looked forward to what he remained convinced was a positive and confident future.

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A word on nomenclature might help. Mee always saw himself as English rather than British and so throughout the book I refer, as Mee nearly always did, to England rather than to Great Britain or the United Kingdom. This is simply a matter of consistency and continuity and reflects the fact that during the period that Mee's influence was at its height, he and many of his generation wrote "England" when they also meant Great Britain. By the end of the nineteenth century a sense of British identity had begun to lessen

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and was supplanted in public consciousness by a racialist-inspired form of English national identity that left little room for Celtic national identities.[7] Certainly by the time that Mee was begin to develop his career, a sense of English nationalism was more fully emerging and can be seen in several aspects of his work and in his views of the world.

Finally, a word about the notes at the back of the book. I have tried to write a book that might appeal to a general audience as well as an academic one; hopefully there is something here for both sets of readers. Those interested in following an academic pathway are invited to examine the notes and those not interested are cordially invited to completely ignore them!

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