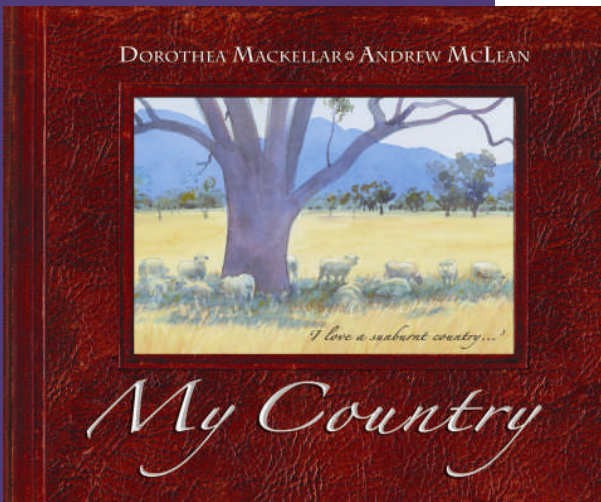


Teachers' Notes

My Country

Dorothea Mackellar
Illustrated by Andrew McLean



OMNIBUS BOOKS

Category	Picture Book
Title	My Country
Author	Dorothea Mackellar
Illustrator	Andrew McLean
Extent	32 pp
Age	4+
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About the Story

Dorothea Mackellar's iconic poem has been brought to life as a beautifully illustrated picture book. The story begins in England, the orderly land of Mackellar's ancestors. But this is not where the narrator's heart lies. She prefers the sunburnt land of Australia with its plains and mountains and ever-changing weather.

It is not a gentle land; it is a challenging one, cruel in times of drought, unpredictable in rainy season. Flood and fire are part of the landscape and can be devastating. Yet for all the wildness, all its ferocity, it can be a generous land and a magnificent one, and those who call it home have an innate connection to the land.

About the Author

Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar OBE was an Australian poet and fiction writer. Her poem 'My Country' is perhaps the best known Australian poem. She wrote a version of it that she called 'Core of My Heart' when she was homesick on a visit to England. She was a young woman at the time, and writing pieces that she sent to magazines for publication. Her most famous poem appeared in the London *Spectator* in September 1908, and was later collected in a book of her poetry called *The Closed Door, and Other Verses*, where it was renamed 'My Country'. She published three more volumes of verse and a novel, *Outlaw's Luck*, during the 1920s. She died in 1968. The Mackellar family owned several properties in the Gunnedah area in New South Wales, and it is this country that inspired her writing.

Writing Style

'My Country' is a rhyming poem, six stanzas in length. The simple, descriptive language is evocative and will speak to all ages. The opening stanza describes the British landscape, but this is not the country the young Dorothea Mackellar yearns for – it is the Australian bush that calls to her heart and remaining stanzas are an

anthem to her homeland. The poet recalls the physical geography of the land and uses adjectival phrases such as 'opal-hearted country' and 'sapphire-misted mountains' to emphasize her delight with it.

The narrator uses language to personify Australia, and in gendering her country, she is able to more strongly connect with it. She invites an Australian audience to share and identify with her feelings by saying that those who are not Australian would not understand the love she feels. By offering this invitation, she has constructed a poem that speaks to our national identity.

About the Illustrator

Andrew McLean is one of Australia's leading illustrators, having won many awards for his work. He has collaborated with his wife Janet McLean on a number of successful picture books. His picture books include *A Year on Our Farm* and *Show Day*, both by Penny Matthews.

Illustrator Inspiration

Andrew McLean says, 'When I was offered the poem the idea of a landscape book intrigued me, but I had a few doubts about the relevance of the poem in today's world. When I re-read the poem I was astonished to discover that Dorothea MacKellar wrote it when she was very young. "My Country" is still in our collective consciousness. For instance after the recent tragic bush fires in Victoria, the Prime Minister and others quoted the line 'her beauty and her terror' from the poem.

'I talked for some time with the publisher about whether this book should be set in modern times or in the period in which MacKellar wrote it. We finally decided to compromise and set the main pictures in her time and include vignettes depicting contemporary Australia.

'My wife Janet and I went for a trip to Gunnedah where Dorothea MacKellar's family had a property, and where much of the poet's inspiration for "My Country" came from. I was able to get a feel for the place, and the landscape that is quite different from my part of the world.

'I used charcoal pencil and mostly watercolour, sometimes with a little gouache or pastel. I worked from my imagination, from drawings done on the spot, and from photographs I took on our trip. Because many of the drawings are set in her time I searched for archival photographs in books and on the internet. For example, the picture of the ring-barked forest came from an early 1900s photograph of a newly cleared farm at Noojee. The scale of the trees in the picture is amazing. I simply created the moonlight. The final picture is from my imagination and memories of my favourite landscape/s - the eroded, undulating hills around Omeo and Yea in Victoria.'

Study Notes for Teachers

The poem 'My Country' is seen to embody all that is special about the Australian landscape. In picture book form it is an ideal resource for students to learn how visual and written texts are used to construct impressions of the Australian landscape, and how text can be used to create national identity. Here are some possible topics for discussion and/or study:

- After reading 'My Country' students could discuss the text and if they think it is recognisably Australian and why. They could then look at the illustrations and discuss how we visualise Australia and how Australian artwork can define this.
- What words do students associate with the Australian landscape? Are there words, phrases or sentiments unique to our land?
- It has been said that the poet was in love with Australia's landscape and we see her connection to the land in her writing. Do you think this holds true for today's Australians? Are we tied to the land in the same way that people were a hundred years ago?

- Dorothea wrote this poem at age 19, when she was homesick in England.
Choose a place that is important to you and using your memories compose a poem along similar lines to 'My Country.'
- Identify poetic devices such as figurative language used in the poem. How does the author personify her subject?
- Look at the poet's other works and compare them with 'My Country'.
- Consider other well-known Australian poetry and compare it with this one.
Do you connect with poetry about the Australian bush?
- The majority of Australia's population lives in cities. Imagine if Dorothea was writing her poem today. Do you think it would be solely about the country?

