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‘Emily Gallagher, Playtime: A History of Australian Childhood’

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Emily Gallagher, *Playtime: A History of Australian Childhood* (La Trobe University Press and Black Inc., 2025), 320pp. Paperback. A\$36.99. ISBN: 978-1-7606-4566-3.

Emily Gallagher's *Playtime* is a groundbreaking and innovative study that makes a significant contribution to the history of Australian childhood and offers a substantial methodological intervention into how histories of childhood and youth can be written. Drawing on Gallagher's award-winning doctoral research, the book creatively interrogates the history of Australian childhood between the period of 1890 and the Second World War in original and creative ways. *Playtime* is structured around six imaginative worlds created by Australian children, including that of amateur journalism, bird loving, war and adventure, dolls, the future, and monsters and fairies. This thematic structure allows Gallagher to interrogate the significance of dream, play, and imagination as a way for children to create and share new worlds and cultures through which they gave meaning and purpose to their lives. Importantly too, this structure enables Gallagher to skilfully move across examinations of geography, class, gender, and settler colonialism and their impacts in shaping childhood experience.

Playtime makes two key interventions in existing scholarship. First, its sustained integration of settler-colonial analysis into the historical examination of childhood imagination highlights the integral role of children as active and influential agents in colonisation. Second, the book offers a significant methodological contribution by challenging the persistent assumption that child-authored primary sources are scarce. The supposed difficulty in accessing children's sources has often been an excuse to explain the long-standing marginalisation of children as historical subjects. Instead, Gallagher draws on a rich and wide array of child-produced sources, including school publications, correspondence, natural history club records, and a variety of personal papers held across Australian repositories. This feat of source recovery offers an exemplary model for future historians of childhood, in demonstrating how to recover youthful voices, feelings, and experiences from perhaps unexpected places.

The book's opening chapter, which focuses on children's school publications and their amateur journalism, will be of broad appeal to readers interested in the growth of children's literary cultures. Meanwhile, the third chapter's focus on war and adventure, demonstrates not only the widespread popularity of war games, but also the limits and boundaries of such imaginative play. Gallagher shows children to be active agents in constructing new national heroes, highlighting their significant contributions to developing ideas of identity and belonging. Girls were far from excluded from this imaginative play, instead, engaging with themes of war in distinct ways. Gallagher traces how war could elicit significant fears about defence and security, while also creating new horizons of aspirations, through figures such as the nurse. Meanwhile, Chapter Four's focus on dolls shows how children could resist the socialisation templates associated with these dolls that were set by the adult world and offers insight into the creative and subversive engagements children had with the material objects they were given.

Of note, is the book's second chapter on bird-loving and birdlands that traces children's long-standing and deep engagement with natural history and environmentalism, which helped to shape a new sense of national identity. Central to this analysis is Gallagher's use of the concept of 'imaginative colonisation', that is, the process by which children as well as adults invested birds and birdsong with meanings that transformed them into symbols of national pride and collective

belonging. By focusing on the sensory world of birdsong and 'bush anthems', Gallaher demonstrates how settler children were active participants in the settler colonial project, by using the natural world to negotiate concepts of home, land, and nationhood to secure and lay claim to unceded land. In 'Flying into the Future', the book's rich and original fifth chapter, Gallagher adeptly and creatively demonstrates how the technology of flight 'catapulted' settler children's imaginations into the future (p. 164). For these children, the aeroplane had the power to transport them to new, fantastic, and modern worlds, and crucially, connect the local to the global.

Meanwhile, Gallagher's consideration of how these emblems of modernity were woven into Aboriginal children's imaginings of Western Arrarnta Country reveals that their artworks were 'simultaneously a site and representation of encounter between two worlds' (p. 186). While settler children understood the aeroplane as an emblem of radical change, Aboriginal children's responses were more complex and varied. Set within the Dreaming, planes were not quite seen as vehicles to another world, but rather as an uncanny, integrated part of the future-past of the land. The final chapter turns to the darker side of children's imaginations, examining the monsters and fears that shaped their inner worlds. These fears, as Gallagher notes, were fuelled by the vast and unfamiliar landscape that settler children found themselves in, and which could take on particularly sinister qualities at night. In response, these children blended inherited European mythology with an emerging bush folklore, highlighting how malevolent beings and other figures of dread could cross cultural divides. While fewer accounts written by Aboriginal children survive, Gallagher uses the well-known figure of the swamp-dwelling bunyip to show how folklore travelled between world and could be reimagined or recast in the settler imagination, serving as a powerful, shared way of understanding the Australian landscape.

While the absence of a consolidated bibliography is a minor practical inconvenience for readers wishing to follow up the abundant source material, Gallaher's innovative book deserves a wide readership among historians of Australia, of childhood, and scholars of settler-colonialism. By demonstrating both that children's voices *are* recoverable and that they matter for our understanding of Australian modernity, settler-colonialism and the politics of imagination, this brilliant book firmly positions the history of childhood as central to broader Australian social and cultural history.

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