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The business of myth-making: *Mary Poppins*, P.L. Travers and the Disney effect

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In just one of the many extraordinary moments during the spectacular Opening Ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games, thirty *Mary Poppins* floated into the stadium on their umbrellas to battle a 40 foot-long inflatable Lord Voldemort. This multi-million pound extravaganza was telecast to a global audience of over one billion people, highlighting in an extremely effective manner the grandeur and eccentricities of the host nation, and featuring uniquely British icons such as Mr Bean, James Bond, The Beatles and Harry Potter, as well as those quintessential icons of Englishness, the Royal Family, double-decker red buses and the National Health Service.

It is likely that most people watching this celebration of Great Britain's rich heritage and culture would have been unaware that the creator of *Mary Poppins*, P.L. Travers, was not in fact of impeccable English stock, and fewer still would have known that she was of Australian birth and upbringing, having spent her formative years in country Queensland. The following year, however, in an attempt to capitalise on the fiftieth anniversary of the *Mary Poppins* film, the Disney Studios released *Saving Mr Banks*, the inside story behind the making of that blockbuster success, and in so doing it reinserted an image of Queensland into Travers' world, in an attempt to account for the adult author's psychological make-up. In this way Hollywood revealed to yet another global audience (albeit a much smaller one) that the creator of *Mary Poppins* had totally reinvented herself after overcoming a fraught upbringing twenty thousand miles away from the British capital.

That P.L. Travers was almost universally presumed to be English is hardly surprising, given her subject material and the fact that she was a notoriously private person who was extremely reticent to divulge details about her personal life, especially those related to her Australian past. Travers would not permit a biography to be written while she was alive; indeed, the only full-length study published during her long life concentrated upon her literary and journalistic output, giving few personal details. Even routine queries for dates, specific productions and employers proved fruitless, as Travers insisted that she be known only through her works (Demers 1991: 14). As she got older and wished to present herself as a literary *grande dame*, Travers doled out small, selective and highly imaginative fragments of her life — mostly relatively oblique and allusive references to her Queensland childhood — but for the most part the fudging and evasions continued. Only after

her death, and particularly with the 1999 publication of Valerie Lawson's comprehensive *Out of the Sky She Came* (this was later reissued as *Mary Poppins She Wrote*, and used as the source material for the 2013 film *Saving Mr Banks*), the more recent ABC documentary *The Shadow of Mary Poppins* (2013) and the BBC biopic *The Secret Life of Mary Poppins* (2013) has Travers' life-story become more recognised. Like Barbara Baynton, another Australian-born author and colossally opinionated snob who made it in English society (in Baynton's case, through marriage into the aristocracy), Travers, who was always fascinated with myths and fairy tales, confected a mythical past of her own, just as she fabricated a contemporary image of herself as an upper middle-class English woman with a cut-glass accent, her 'perfect diction' containing no trace of her Queensland roots (Zaleski 1999: 170). Even her closest friends were astonished when she confessed the 'dark secret' that she was Australian born and bred (Mitchell 2013). It is ironic, then, that the Disney studios beat her at her own game, not only reworking into its own particular branding the book that brought her international renown, but also reinventing the author herself in its account of two weeks in 1960 when she visited the Burbank studios in California to act as a consultant for the planned film, and in so doing reintroducing her Queensland childhood as a crucial influence on her life and her literary career.

Inventing P.L. Travers

The hitherto concealed facts about P.L. Travers's life are now reasonably well authenticated. Helen Lyndon Goff was born in Maryborough, Queensland in 1899, not 'in the Australian Outback' as Ben Haggarty (1999: 19) claimed in her eulogy. Her father, Travers Robert Goff, whom she adored and idealised, was a bank manager, later demoted to bank clerk, not an 'Irish rancher in Queensland', as Adrian House, Travers' editor and long-time friend, maintained in her *Guardian* obituary (1999: 25). Goff was a depressive, an alcoholic and a yarn-spinner, and although his daughter claimed that he was Irish, he was in fact London born (he hailed from Deptford, although he was of Irish lineage). Travers also claimed that her father was a sugar planter who had planted tea in Ceylon prior to his move to Australia (Demers 1991: 2): this is, as Travers' biographer observes, a likely attempt to elevate his social status, given that 'Travers preferred to be the daughter of a gentleman farmer in the tropical outback than the daughter of a pen-pusher in the back office of a provincial bank' (Lawson 1999: 15). Travers also declared that her father came from a very old Irish family — 'Irish gentry, what we call landed people ... he was a younger son, and younger sons were sent to explore the world' (Lawson 1999: 15), whereas he was actually the son of a shipping agent. In a speech to the US Library of Congress in 1966, Travers concocted a fanciful vision of herself as an antipodean version of William Blake's 'Little Black Boy'.

Whereas Blake's displaced child was born in the Southern wild, she was 'born in the subtropics of Australia' where 'the country was new and the land itself very old ... in spite of all the brash pioneering atmosphere that still existed, even a child could sense the antiquity of it'. In this highly romanticised account of her childhood, where she was supposedly 'drenched in the Celtic twilight', Travers alleged that her father's nostalgia for Ireland continually fed her imagination:

84 My body ran about in the Southern sunlight but my inner world had subtler
85 colours, the greys and snows of England where Little Joe swept all the crossings
86 and the numberless greens of Ireland which seemed to be inhabited solely by
87 poets plucking harps, heroes lordily cutting off each other's heads, and veiled
88 ladies sitting on the ground keening. (Travers 1980: 5)

89 On another occasion, though, she asserted that the Australian bush contained
90 a mythical dimension that strongly influenced her as a child: at night, going about
91 cautiously 'lest the Pleiades catch in your hair', she claimed she would stand for
92 hours, listening to silence:

93 Be still long enough, I thought, and the trees would take no notice of me and
94 continue whatever it was they were doing or saying before I happened upon
95 them. For nothing was more certain, to my mind, than that they lived a busy and
96 communicative life which ceased — at a command given — whenever I appeared.
97 (Haggarty 1999: 20)

98 Even more extraordinary still was the claim that she was 'influenced by the
Q2 99 ancient culture of the Aborigines' (Van der Post 1999: 151). Obsessed with senti-
100 mental notions of Irishness, and always entranced by myths and fairy tales, Travers
101 invented her own childhood, as children's writers often do — despite the fact that
102 she hated to be thought of as one, declaring 'I turn my back on children', and always
103 insisting that she wrote only to please herself (Travers 1999: 181). She never ceased
104 sublimating her own turbulent upbringing into a solid, secure childhood, insisting
Q3 105 that 'my parents were very loving, I had a most loving childhood' (Burness 1982).

106 In real life, though, things were very different. When Travers was seven, her
107 father died suddenly. Travers's mother was beset by grief, so the family was helped
108 out by her rich, brisk and practical Great Aunt Ellie, so clearly a model for Mary
109 Poppins herself, complete with her sayings, mannerisms and values. Despite her
110 misleading assertions that she was 'educated by governesses' (Lawson 1999: 290),
111 Travers was then educated at her aunt's expense at a leading Sydney school. She
112 subsequently toured New South Wales with a Shakespearean troupe, and dabbled
113 in poetry, having by this stage already renamed herself Pamela Travers: Pamela
114 because to her it seemed more refined and 'actressy' (Lawson 1999: 66), and Travers
115 as it was her father's name.

116 At the age of twenty-four, she moved to England, where she made the acquaint-
117 tance of the now-elderly members of the Celtic Twilight, in particular her first
118 father-substitute, George Russell, the Irish poet and mystic known as AE, who
119 indulged his young acolyte and published her poems, declaring that they 'could
120 not have been written by anyone who wasn't Irish' (Burness 1982). From that
121 time onwards, Travers worked as a freelance journalist and theatre critic, using a
122 number of pseudonyms. Her personal life remains speculative, and lesbian and/or
123 bisexual affairs are likely, although no firm proof exists. She lived with her female
124 companion, Madge Barnard — daughter of the late editor of *Punch* — for ten years
125 in a Sussex cottage, and their prickly relationship was tested by Travers' friend-
126 ships with other women, including Jessie Orage, the widow of Alfred Orage, the
127 editor of the *New English Weekly*, and the artist Gertrude Hermes. She became a
128 follower of the Russian émigré George Gurdjieff, now usually seen as a charlatan
129 and peddler of hokum, but then lionised as a guru by a host of literary figures,
130 including Katharine Mansfield.

Travers' best-remembered work, *Mary Poppins*, was published in 1934, and was dedicated to her mother, who had died ten years earlier. Five further Poppins books appeared, the last in 1988. In these novels, she reinvented herself yet again as P.L. Travers, the androgynous title chosen so as not to be identified as 'one more silly woman writing books' which were 'never respected as literature' (Lawson 1999: 162).

Meanwhile, in 1939, at the age of forty, she adopted a baby son, Camillus, whose grandfather, Joseph Hone, was the publisher of AE's work, as well as the biographer and friend of W.B. Yeats. Camillus's parents were unable to look after him and his twin brother Anthony but, following advice from a Californian astrologer, Travers was only willing to take one child. After this, Travers took to wearing a wedding ring and insisted on being addressed as Mrs Travers. However, her experiment in single motherhood was not a success. Camillus was sent to boarding school, and was kept unaware of his twin's existence, or that he was not Travers' biological child (he had apparently been told that his father had died somewhere in the tropics), until he was seventeen and had a chance encounter with Anthony in his local pub. He was shocked by these revelations and although Travers felt no guilt in this matter, because for her 'it was all written in the stars' (Mitchell 2013), Camillus's grand-daughter Kitty believed that from then on he used this trauma to excuse unforgiveable behaviour. Like Travers' own father and his twin, Camillus became an alcoholic.

Travers spent World War II in America, including some time in New Mexico with the Navahos, with whom she claimed special spiritual kinship, thereafter adopting her lifelong habit of wearing tiered flouncy skirts and silver bangles. She also spent much time in New York, a city that she called her 'spiritual home' (Lawson 1999: 323), and where she lived on and off until the late 1970s. Her last thirty years were devoted to an idiosyncratic search for meaning influenced by Zen Buddhism, Gurdjieffian spiritual teaching and the psychoanalytical teachings of Karlfried Graf Durckheim and Jidda Krishnamurti.

This intensely self-absorbed woman with intellectual pretensions hawked her wares following the success of the *Mary Poppins* film, snaring American writing residencies — first at Radcliffe College in Boston, in 1965–66 and then at Smith College in 1966. Although she represented her time at Smith as a striking success, claiming that the students and staff members revered her and told her, 'All we want to do is to touch the hem of your garment' (Lawson 1999: 309), in reality she was not well received by the staff, nor the proto-feminist female students, who found her a voluble bore (1999: 310). Travers received an OBE in 1977, and in 1978 an honorary PhD from Chatham College in the United States. Thereafter she demanded that she be addressed as Dr Travers (Lawson 1999: 335).

Her interest in myths, legends, folklore and fairy tales became even more obsessive as she grew older, and although she regarded her later philosophical books as much more important than *Mary Poppins*, these were largely derided by critics, with her analysis of the Sleeping Beauty myth dismissed in the *Kirkus Review* as 'repetitious and windy . . . buried in self-opinionated blah' (Demers 1991: 102). As she increasingly looked to her legacy and role as a literary *eminence grise*, she attempted to sell her papers to various libraries. They were finally sold to the Mitchell Library in 1981 at a much-reduced price of £20,000. Travers's light had dimmed,

179 and there was not much interest anymore — except in the rejected country of her
180 birth.

181 **The Disneyfication of *Mary Poppins***

182 Walt Disney courted Travers for nearly twenty years before the movie deal was
183 finalised, and Travers' quintessentially English story was transformed by America's
184 then-premier storyteller. Travers resisted Disney's assault on her work until the last,
185 even demanding in a loud voice at the premiere's after-party — an event to which
186 she was not invited, but to which she badgered an invitation from Disney executives
187 — that the animated special effects had to be removed. To this observation, Disney
188 apparently replied, 'Pam, the ship has sailed' (Mitchell 2013).

189 Travers objected not only to the animation, but to the musical comedy elements,
190 the casting of Julie Andrews (apparently she was too pretty, although she did agree
191 that her nose was correct, and in her peremptory fashion she rang Andrews, a
192 day after the latter had given birth, to see whether her voice was appropriate).
193 She particularly objected to Mary, who was for her the very image of propriety,
194 dancing a can-can like a hoyden on the roof-top, displaying all her underwear. She
195 also loathed Dick Van Dyke: quite apart from his dreadful 'cor blimey' Cockney
196 accent, in her opinion Bert had too large a role in reconciling the family, his co-
197 magician part having been made bigger by Disney, who was not convinced that
198 the young Julie Andrews could sell the film on her own. Moreover, Travers was
199 dismayed by the refashioning of Mr and Mrs Banks: Mr Banks's moustache was
200 apparently all wrong, while ditsy Mrs Banks was now a suffragette, another Disney
201 decision as he felt that audiences would otherwise be critical of a mother needing a
202 nanny for her children.

203 What is evident is that Disney, with his proven track record of manipulating
204 the American consumer market, was much more aware of what made a successful
205 movie product than Travers, who considered film a lesser art form. Disney had a
206 reputation as a great charmer and crafty salesman, and he was incidentally a shrewd
207 risk-taker — in this instance not only taking on Julie Andrews in her first film role
208 (she had famously been disregarded in favour of the non-singing Audrey Hepburn
209 in *My Fair Lady*, a role she played on Broadway), but also the songwriting Sherman
210 Brothers in their first full-scale musical. Furthermore, by the 1960s Disney's writers
211 were adept at filleting books rather than slavishly adapting them into film scripts:
212 in this instance they had teased out a straightforward narrative arc from Travers'
213 series of vignettes.

214 In Travers' opinion, the most contentious element in the wholesale trivialis-
215 ing and cheapening of her work was Disney's excision of her Zen mysticism
216 and symbolism, upon which she naturally placed the highest significance. Angela
217 Woollacott (2001: 46) argues that colonial outsiders (such as Travers) have par-
218 ticipated centrally in the creation of English literature and Englishness, and that
219 the novels might be seen as imperial fantasies historically situated in an idealised
220 Edwardian Britain, but *Mary Poppins* is more probably a powerful mythic figure
221 that transcends nationality. Although Travers was always vague about the gen-
222 esis of the figure, maintaining that the 'idea of *Mary Poppins* has been blowing
Q223 in and out of me, like a curtain at a window, all my life' (Demers 1999: 1), and
224 imperiously announcing in an interview that 'I cannot summon up an inspiration;

I myself am summoned' (Burness 1982), her chilly, dark tale follows the common mythological pattern where a mysterious stranger comes to solve a situation, then leaves once the job is accomplished. Travers emphasised that she 'grew up on a diet of mythology' (Travers 1980: 14), that 'myth has been my study and joy ever since — the age of three', and that Mary Poppins 'came out of the same world as the fairy tales' (Burness 1982). Naturally, she was particularly thrilled when her mentor, AE, commented that:

Popkins (sic), had she lived in another age, in the old times to which she certainly belongs, would undoubtedly have had long golden tresses, a wreath of flowers in one hand, and perhaps a spear in the other. Her eyes would have been like the sea, her nose comely, and on her feet winged sandals. But, this being Kali Yuga, as the Hindus call it — in our terms the Iron Age — she comes in habiliments most suited to it. (Travers 1980: 13–14)

On another occasion, she hinted that Mary Poppins might be part of the Placiades or another constellation (Lawson 1999: 161).

Given this infatuation with the mythical aspect of her tales, Travers was adamant that there should be nothing jolly or cosy, whimsical or sentimental about her commonsensical nanny with her particular mix of the ordinary and the extraordinary. She also insisted that Mary Poppins should have absolutely no sense of humour and be easily offended. *Her* Mary Poppins was tart, brusque and vain — much like herself, it seems — and Travers was dismayed that Disney had taken her rather dour novel with the brusque, disapproving, at times even vindictive nanny and turned it into a cloying, saccharine musical. Prior to filming, she instructed Disney's script-writers exactly how to portray Mary:

The humour, the absurdity, and the pathos, comes from the fact that she is, indeed, like a Dutch doll, not pretty in the least, and it is this that makes her vanity so funny. It is Mary Poppins' plainness of person, her absolute rightness, without ever being pert, her calm and serene behaviour in the midst of the most unlikely adventures that make the fun of the story. If her gravity is not maintained, all the point is lost. She is always feminine, prim, neat, demure, sniffy, arrogant. (Draper 1999: 13)

Travers should nevertheless have known what to expect from the Disney treatment: as early as 1938, she had taken Disney's *Snow White* to task, castigating it for its unctuous sanctimoniousness. 'There is profound cynicism,' she wrote in her review, 'at the root of this, as of all, sentimentality' (Demers 1991: 45). She must have recognised that Disney would try to make a travesty of her dry, rather stern character and the book's modest ethos — but perhaps, in her supreme self-confidence, thought she could change all that. In the end, however, the reworking was grandiose, unsubtle and gorgeous-looking, its all-singing and all-dancing spectacular effects stripping away all her elusive meanings. Disney seized upon the fantasy world of her books but eliminated their mystery, making, as Lawson notes, 'a film of no ambivalence, no depth, and not much sadness'. But his aim was never to mystify and challenge the audience; rather, it was to show how peace was restored to a family in strife. Instead, 'his happy family and jolly songs helped cheer middle America' (Lawson 1999: 245).

After the premiere, Travers' key objections were cogently expressed in a letter to a Disney biographer:

I did not care very much for the film he made of my books. Generally because, although it was a colourful entertainment, it was not true to their meaning. Nor do I like what he does with the Fairy Tales . . . How much better a film would it have been had it carefully stayed with the true version of *Mary Poppins*! Her very plainness would have given it drama, for she herself would shine through . . . (Sibley 1999: 51–2)

Nonetheless, she did try to negotiate with Disney to make a sequel, and her infamous loathing of the film actually escalated over the years, particularly once she knew that the studio was not interested in further ventures, and so there was nothing to be gained by remaining silent.

During their pre-film negotiations, Travers was taken in by Disney's charisma, confessing to a friend 'it was as if he were dangling a watch, hypnotically, before the eyes of a child' (Sibley 1999: 54). Also, the money settled upon by her lawyer Arnold Goodman (he was later the lawyer who represented Princess Diana in her divorce settlement, and was even in those days renowned for driving a hard bargain) must have been a huge inducement for a writer with languishing sales, as Travers was paid \$100,000, plus 5 per cent of all gross profits, eventually making her a multi-millionaire. As Lawson comments, 'she fell into Walt's embrace like a lovesick fool, but the fortune he gave her almost made up for the betrayal' (1999: 242). Later, however, Travers claimed only to remember Disney's smarminess, as illustrated by this report of her account of meeting Walt at Los Angeles airport:

As they settled into the back seat of the taxi, he stuck out his hand and said, with his ingratiating Mickey Mouse smile, 'You can call me Walt'. Pulling herself up to her most formidable posture of Old World dignity, the famous author replied, 'You can call *me* Mrs Travers'. 'Stick to your guns, lady!' said the cab driver. (Heyneman 1999: 86)

She even pretended not to remember the name of the man who had so mongrelised her text: 'When I was doing the film with George Disney . . . That is his name, isn't it? George? . . . I had a terrible time with him' (Zinner 1999: 147). Disney, however, had the last laugh, and his 1964 movie version, accurately down-playing her authorship with the title 'Walt Disney's *Mary Poppins*', is the one largely remembered today.

The Disneyfication of P.L. Travers

Disney not only transformed *Mary Poppins*, but in the recent film *Saving Mr Banks* the studio posthumously rewrote the story of its author, highlighting the importance of her Queensland upbringing and drawing attention to the tragic family situation that she had tried so assiduously to deny in her lifetime. Because it was released in 2013, close to the fiftieth anniversary of the *Mary Poppins* film, accusations were made that it was designed primarily to direct viewers back to the original: the critic in the *New Yorker* described the movie as 'nerveless promotional chutzpah' (Lane 2013), while in the *New Republic* it was described as 'one of the most flagrant pieces of product placement in modern screen history' (Thomson 2013). Yet the original draft of the *Banks* script had been written by Australian writers and was

then overseen by the BBC, which brought it to the American studio's attention, and allegedly the Disney studio's one stipulation was to insist that Walt, a heavy smoker who died of lung cancer two years after the movie was released, should not be seen smoking (Keegan 2013).

Despite almost universal praise for the central characters' performances, critical reactions to the second film have varied widely, with many feeling Travers had been hard done by, her story and personality warped shamelessly to fit Disney's own agenda. Travers's friends immediately sprang to the dead author's defence, deriding the movie as a sugary, rose-tinted chunk of corporate myth-making that relegated her character to a harsh unpleasant kill-joy in contrast to Disney's saintly white-washed figure. Well-known fantasy writer Jane Yolen, who had visited Travers when she was writer in residence at Smith, protested, 'I do not recognise her in the Emma Thompson portrayal, nor the story of the making of the movie, which she rightly hated' (response cited in Griswold 2013), while children's literature scholar Jerry Griswold wrote:

This is a film about a film and (that beloved topic) Hollywood on Hollywood. Walt Disney studios not only released this film, Walt Disney is its subject and its hero. In the end this is a self-serving and self-congratulating movie, and it comes once more at P.L. Travers' expense. (Griswold 2013)

Furthermore Disney biographer Marc Eliot notes that:

Disney had no creative respect for this woman. He wanted a property, and once he got it he completely ignored her input and all the restrictions she had agreed to. And that's how the film got made . . . That's revisionist history, that's part of the myth of Walt Disney. (Stewart 2013).

Certainly in the film Travers is presented as a joyless, loveless pedant finally giving herself over to the delight and imagination of the Wonderful World of Disney, although she could just as easily have been portrayed as a creative, passionate person, with dignity and real emotions, getting steamrolled by one of the most powerful companies in the world. As noted in the *New York Post*, she was one of the few authors who ever stood up to the Disney juggernaut, fighting for a level of involvement and approval that most in her position were denied: 'She did it in an era, and an industry, where women were few and far between and faced an uphill struggle just to be heard at all' (Stewart 2013). In short, the movie was criticised for patronising the writer, sympathising with the corporation and in doing so presenting Travers as an extraordinarily difficult person. Although the film seems to have compassion for Travers's personal trials, when it comes to storytelling critics tend to agree that this film is squarely on the side of the Disney approach of sweet songs and emotional resolution.

Certainly the core of the film is a fictionalised interpretation of the two contentious pre-production weeks in which Travers visited the Disney studios in Burbank, California. It is a piece of popular entertainment, which makes no claims to be a documentary — and indeed takes dollops of artistic licence. A great many things have been altered. For example, at the time in which the film is set, Travers had already signed away her creative rights to the story and was present as a consultant in name only, a fact that was altered by the filmmakers to allow for Travers' repeated squawks of 'Mary Poppins is not for sale!' and in order to add to the

tension (even though the audience already knows what eventually happened). The first draft of the screenplay, by Australian writer Sue Smith, focused on Travers's bizarre single-motherhood tale, drawing poignant parallels between the creator of one of fiction's most beloved caregivers and the treatment of her own adopted child — presumably highlighting the irony of the celebrated children's author as a damaged person who grew up to inflict damage on other people, most notably her own adopted son.

When the second writer, Kelly Marcel, came to the project, she decided to leave out Camillus and create instead a dual narrative, one thread of which focused on Travers's traumatic childhood in Queensland, the other on that pivotal fortnight in her two decades-long tussle with Disney. Marcel also introduced a fictional character, the amiable chauffeur played by Paul Giamatti, with whom Travers finally shares a human moment when he confides that he has a wheelchair-bound daughter who loves her book: 'I didn't have a bridge to her feelings,' Marcel claimed. 'We needed *someone* to like her' (Keegan 2013). Giamatti concurred, saying in an interview, 'They needed a relaxed, kind human being, which is exactly what Ralph is' (Corliss 2013).

In this canny rewriting, Travers is high-minded but cash-strapped, and she deigns to visit California because she has no other alternative. She is seen hating everything about the trip, from the crying child on the plane to Los Angeles itself — perhaps because it reminds her of the Australia of her youth. She is rude and mean-spirited, and treats people shabbily, condescending to everyone. The behind-the-scenes business with the Sherman Brothers is easily the most entertaining and compelling part of the film, as the ever-polite, mostly deferential but exasperated tunesmiths struggle with her uncompromising and dictatorial demands. Perhaps these segments are of particular fascination because they appear to be authentic, as the voiceover tapes during the end-credits indicate the shrill accuracy of Emma Thompson's snippy performance (Travers had insisted on the taping of her torrid writing sessions with the musicians). In these scenes, the friction is largely played for laughs, especially given that the audience might enjoy seeing Travers argue against things that are now so hard-wired into popular culture. They might be nostalgic pap, but they are enjoyable, as Travers tartly nit-picks the script, the musical scores (she was not musical, and wanted 'Greensleeves' included) and the production design. As *Variety* noted, the movie is 'thick with affection for Hollywood's most literal "dream factory" and wry in its depiction of the studio film-making process' (Foundas 2013).

Her hair in a short bubble perm, her face clenched in exasperation and her body clad in figure-hugging tweed suits, the P.L. Travers represented here is simply impossible in her demands. There is comic exaggeration in her frightfully proper English stuffiness, her terrible suspicion of Hollywood razzamatazz. She is peremptory, ungrateful and opinionated as she fights to maintain the integrity of her cherished creation against the certain traducing implied by the Disney brand. She is a testily insufferable contrarian, 'a nightmare of negation in a creative environment, like an adult version of the child who refuses to eat her greens' (Schembri 2014). She delivers withering put-downs of Dick Van Dyke's thespian abilities: 'he's no Laurence Olivier,' she sniffs, and while examining the Winnie the Pooh toy, one of many gifted to her in her plush Beverly Hills hotel suite, she grimaces: 'Poor A.A. Milne.' At times, this snooty curmudgeon even comes across as seriously unhinged — for example, when she refuses to allow the colour red to appear anywhere in the

proposed film. As in real life, this Travers seeks complete professional autonomy, tries to overrule everybody, and is reluctant to relinquish her jealously guarded characters to Disney. On the other hand, Walt Disney — genial and debonair, twinkly-eyed and avuncular — is a folksy American offering friendship. He epitomises the warmth and intimacy of the New World, as well as the casual manners: ‘It is so disconcerting to hear a complete stranger use my name,’ Travers gripes.

The film’s central argument is that Travers is a prickly, lonely woman who has been traumatised by her upbringing in Queensland and in particular by her attachment to and the death of her lovable but feckless father, the source of both her storytelling gifts and her pain. Despite the likelihood of the real Travers’s robust long-term sexual relationships, and the presence of her then-estranged son, she is portrayed as a tiresome, uptight and extremely repressed spinster. That, then, becomes the reason why the Mary Poppins story is so important to her (‘Mary Poppins is family to me,’ she repeatedly asserts), not the fact that she was arguing for the integrity of her artistic vision in the face of slick simplistic commercialisation.

Yet this rather hackneyed ploy of grounding adult creativity in childhood misery leads to a serious artistic flaw: namely that the two narratives are seriously imbalanced. There are simply too many relentlessly regular flashbacks to Travers’s life in Queensland (filmed in Southern California for logistic reasons, though it is never convincing as dusty turn-of-the-century Queensland), leading up to the death of her father and the arrival of her controlling aunt, complete with parrot-headed cane, to sort out the family chaos. This tough yet interminable back-story jars with the Hollywood strand and bogs the movie down because of the dissonant tonal shifts to Travers’s dark past, as her hardscrabble Australian childhood spent worshipping her doting, playful but drunken father is spliced in and used as an explanation for her difficult behaviour as an adult, as well as a feint towards sympathy for Travers’ character. Furthermore, although Aunt Ellie — the inspiration for the magical nanny — appears mid-way through the movie, we find out very little about her, and gain no insights into what she did to make such an impression on Travers. This narrative strand seems particularly contrived and forced, unlike the comedy-drama about the behind-the-scenes convolutions to bring *Mary Poppins* to the screen.

In essence, the main thread of the movie is set up like a conventional romantic comedy, as two mismatched people with very different cultural values and perspectives dance around each other in a fraught and protracted courtship until eventually Travers surrenders to Disney’s powers of seduction. Yet, although Travers is the standard frigid woman in need of thawing, the relationship remains strictly platonic (albeit with glaringly Freudian father undertones), even if in one scene a sad and lonesome Travers does cuddle an almost man-sized Mickey Mouse doll — a gift from Disney that she had earlier disdained — in her Los Angeles hotel bed. Instead, Disney acts as her therapist, and later takes an entirely invented trip to London, where he solves her childhood traumas sensitively and insightfully. It seems that he understands the need to save Mr Banks, and thereby Travers’ own father, because of his own difficult relationship with his father, Elias. Much like her late father, and her real-life succession of literary and spiritual swamis, this Disney is a consummate story-purveyor, and by selling the product of her trauma in the form of film rights, he is able to transmute her childhood grief into joy for other children. In the end, Travers attends the premiere and cries as she attains a kind of healing, the lingering psychological issues with her father being resolved when stuffy Mr Banks leaves

his office to go fly a kite with his children. In a schmaltzy journey of closure, she becomes a Disney convert as she learns to loosen up and embrace the magic.

Is the film unduly hagiographical towards Disney? Well yes — especially in his empathetic and insightful psycho-analysing. Admittedly, there is no trace here of the real-life anti-communist zealot. Yet Disney, as played by Tom Hanks, has at times the look of a wily huckster playing Travers along expertly, an occasional gimlet-eyed look undercutting his aggressively chipper demeanour. His smoothly persistent charm only partly hides the steely resolve with which he cajoles her into a personal tour of the Magic Kingdom, where she reluctantly rides his wife's favourite horse, Jingles, on the carousel. More important still, however, is the question of whether the film is unfair to Travers.

Is it a character assassination? Well, probably not so much. In actual fact it seems likely that this is a sanitised portrayal, and that Travers was even less likeable and charming than shown in the film. The remaining Sherman brother, Richard, has described their 'collaboration' as a 'truly difficult time' (Mitchell 2013), 'like two weeks of ulcers', complaining in the *New York Times* that 'she didn't care for our feelings, how she chopped us apart' (Rochlin 2013). Moreover — perhaps partly as a tribute to Thompson's acting — the audience is led to feel sorry for her in an uplifting ending. It is ironic that, just as Disney's film whitewashed and simplified *Mary Poppins*, telling a very different story in a very different manner (and medium), this movie has done the same to Travers, revealing only one dimension of Poppins's complex creator: in the words of the *New Statesman*, this is 'a neatly pressed version, without the hippyish bangles, weird superstitions or secretly adopted son. Travers, in turn, has been supercalifragilistically Disneyfied' (Grove 2013). Yet again. Disney mythmaking prevails, and peace is restored — this time to a person, not a family in strife.

Late in the film, Disney tells Travers that their job is to restore order to the chaos of life, to infuse bleak realities with bright, happy colours: 'It's what we storytellers do.' This storyline clearly reflects the Disney brand of mainstream entertainment, cleaving to its well-known template that all problems can be overcome, and even the most malign individuals can be redeemed. In the end, it becomes a whimsical, fly-weight showbiz-historical comedy-drama spruiking good-natured sweetness and American charm, reinforcing family reconciliation and personal redemption. Just as Walt Disney's *Mary Poppins* remains the definitive version, it is likely that the P.L. Travers in *Saving Mr Banks* will be the same. And, due at least in part to this Disneyfication, P.L. Travers has been belatedly recognised as a Queenslander by birthright, even though her early experiences were so shocking that she needed to reinvent herself completely as an upper-class Englishwoman.

After the 1964 film version of *Mary Poppins*, Travers mused to a friend:

The ways of filmmakers are strange. It is as though they took a sausage, threw away the contents but kept the skin, and filled that skin with their own ideas, very far from the original substance. They try to 'improve' upon what is. (Sibley 1999: 51–4)

Yet in essence this is not so very different from her own storytelling about her life, her struggles to respond to her various conflicting identities. And it is ironic, too, that a person so protective of her private life, so terribly keen to reinvent herself, has been rewritten so comprehensively that this notorious control-freak was powerless

to control either her novel or the story of her own life. While Travers would most likely have approved of her character's inclusion in that Olympic celebration of inspired Englishness, and she would certainly have been delighted by Mary Poppins' elevation to the pantheon of beloved English literary figures, one can only imagine just how much she would have hated to see her Queensland childhood being played out in such a blatantly emotive way in *Saving Mr Banks* as the 'explanation' for her joylessness.

Even more potent, perhaps, would be her horrified reaction to the recent establishment of the Mary Poppins Festival, now held every July in Maryborough, where 'a personalised Mary Poppins guide unlocks magical links between the novels and the Maryborough of old' and scheduled events include the Great Nanny Challenge, where celebrities and others dress up in traditional nanny uniforms and join in races with traditional prams, as well as the Chimney Sweep Competition and the 'Feed the Birds' Clayplay. And so the process of Disneyfication appears to be unstoppable: in a final, eloquent instance of the triumph of art over life, the guest of honour at the Mary Poppins Festival in 2014 was none other than Annie Buckley, the actor who played Travers as a child in *Saving Mr Banks*.

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