

THE PROBLEM OF CONSOLATION IN THE COUNTRY OF LOST CHILDREN

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Let me begin with what I hope is some illuminating misquotation and decontextualisation. ‘For families [of lost children] waiting was an onerous and unavoidable reality. ‘Every day, every hour ... they probe the unknown’’. And another: ‘Remembrance is part of the landscape ... memorials dot the countryside’. And one more: ‘towns and villages ... were ... communities of the bereaved ... The grief of widows, orphans, parents, friends was ‘seen’ at the annual commemoration ceremonies, and, to a degree we will never know, their loss was shared by their neighbours and friends. Community here had a very local character ...’. Finally ‘there was a progression of mutual help, a pathway along which many groups and individuals sought to provide knowledge, then consolation, then commemoration’. This is nearly to speak of the circumstances that often attended the loss of children in the bush in nineteenth-century Australia. Such losses united communities first in searching and then in either rejoicing or grieving when the child was discovered alive, or dead or – most tormenting of all – never found. Thus ‘knowledge’ could not always be gained, but ‘consolation’ from the community was sure not least because such a loss could have befallen any family within it. ‘Commemoration’, perhaps in the form of memorials in stone or scholarships named for the lost ones, was frequent.

The passages which I was quoting, with distortions, are to do with loss on a catastrophic scale. They come from Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1995) which is subtitled ‘The Great War in European Cultural History’. Those differences of scale at once admitted, there remain suggestive analogies between the two kinds of loss. We can also discern an eerie preview in Australian responses to the loss of children in the bush and what would occur during and after the Great War. I was led to this comparison while pondering aspects of the material which I had gathered for

my book *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (1999) but had not analysed there at length. My attention had been principally directed to understanding what reactions to the loss of children indicated about the moral, cultural and social life of Australia in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. I argued that in the first instance the child was a surrogate figure for the adult generation which had not yet begun to feel that it belonged in this country. When we reach the twentieth century, human agency rather than an indifferent landscape is the cause of terrible losses of children – by abduction, abortion, neglect, abandonment, murder. What this seemed to speak of in part was a fear of the future into which they might be born in Australia. Secondary themes emerged, in particular the image of reconciliation that the activities of black trackers afforded, but which was occluded before the end of the nineteenth century. Thus adult black men were often the agents of salvation of white children lost in the lands from which the Aborigines had been dispossessed. I did not in detail consider the sorts of consolation which grieving families and communities looked for in their times of loss. This lecture has given me the opportunity to do so, while acknowledging how much of it remained a publicly unconfided business.

Let me offer a classic instance of the lost child narrative. This is not factual reporting of a specific incident, but an imaginative reconstruction. As such it is an indication of how these narratives took on a predictable shape through repetition and how different forms of representation – newspaper accounts, magazine illustrations, verse, fiction, pantomime, fairy tale – influenced one another. The result was a composite, master narrative which began to assume the contours of legend. But back to the story. This is Henry Lawson's 'The Babies in the Bush', which was published in the collection *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (1901). The speaker is the bushman Jack Ellis, who is responding to a mother's story of her lost boy and girl:

I could see it all. She and the half-caste rushing towards where the children were seen last, with Old Peter after them. The hurried search in the nearer scrub. The mother calling all the time for Maggie and Wally, and growing wilder as the minutes flew past. Old Peter's ride to the musterers' camp.

Horsemen seeming to turn up in no time and from nowhere, as they do in a case like this, and no matter how lonely the district. Bushmen galloping through the scrub in all directions. The hurried search the first day, and the mother mad with anxiety as the night came on. Her long, hopeless, wild-eyed watch through the night; starting up at every sound of a horse's hoof, and reading the worst in one glance at the rider's face. The systematic work of the search-parties next day and the days following. How those days do fly past. The women from the next run or selection, and some from the town, driving ten or twenty miles, perhaps, to stay with and try to comfort the mother. ('Put the horse to the cart, Jim: I must go to that poor woman!') Comforting her with improbable stories of children who had been lost for days, and were none the worse for it when they were found. The mounted policemen out with the black trackers. Search-parties cooeing to each other about the Bush, and lighting signal-fires. The reckless break-neck rides for news and more help. And the Boss himself, wild-eyed and haggard, riding about the Bush with Andy and one or two others perhaps, and searching hopelessly, days after the rest had given up all hope of finding the children alive. All this passed before me as Mrs Head talked, her voice sounding the while as if she were in another room; and when I roused myself to listen, she was on to the fairies again.

We will return to this story later: but note the rallying of the community for the search; the willingness of the women immediately to offer companionship and consolation to the mother; the enlistment of story of children found in time to soften the pain. The arresting touch is the final one. The mother is 'on to the fairies again'. There is no disparagement intended, rather – as we will see when we return to 'The Babies in the Bush', a salving delusion, a private, maddened form of consolation. We might recall in passing – and to return to the initial analogy – what a stimulus to spiritualism, the belief that one could commune with the dead – was provided by the Great War.

I want to turn next to the loss of three children near Daylesford in Victoria in 1867. They went missing on 30 June, but their bodies – in states of advanced decomposition that newspapers

graphically reported – were not discovered until 16 September. After an inquest at the Farmers' Arms Hotel, the funeral took place on the following day. The procession passed along Vincent, Howe and Raglan Streets (names recalling Britain's military past). One thousand people continued on to the cemetery. The Reverend Main from the Scotch Church read the 90th Psalm ('Lord thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations'), the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians (Paul's account and interpretation of the resurrection of Christ), and then finished with the seventh chapter of Revelations, which ends 'and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes'. At the conclusion of the service, the mourners filed by the single, open grave, 'taking a farewell look in their resting place of the little ones, whose wanderings had formed so prominent a part in the public mind for the past eleven weeks' (as the *Daylesford Mercury* reported). The borough council agreed to collect subscriptions for a fund 'having for its object the erection of a monument to the children and enclosing the grave in the Daylesford Cemetery' (as the local paper had it on 26 September). That monument still stands in Daylesford, in mute testimony to lost children who – unlike the three Duffs at Horsham in Victoria three years before – did not providentially survive their ordeal of exposure in the bush. The graveyard plan directs one to a single column above the grave of the three boys. On one panel of the memorial their end is tersely related: 'After An Ineffectual Search Their Remains were found by accident in A Hollow Tree near Musk Creek on September 14th 1867 and After a Public Funeral were here Deposited'.

This inscription is a dry, restrained farewell to the three lost children. The consolation no doubt offered to their parents was at once of an intimate and communal kind. Outsiders had their say as well. The *Illustrated Australian News* printed a poem by 'Alice' of Richmond. Remembering her Tennyson, she titled it 'In Memoriam. The Lost Children of Daylesford'. In the poem the particulars of their plight are almost altogether erased. Only 'the old hollow tree', with which it concludes, is an allusion to the circumstances of the boys' deaths. Interestingly, 'Alice' leaves God out of her poem. She remarks how hard it is 'to lay the little ones/ Down for their final rest'; speculates on 'the heart wrung agony' of the stricken parents; imagines the events which led the children to their deaths. If 'they started full of rosy health' on

their wanderings, they ‘found in sad despair/ That they had lost their way’. ‘Anxious searchers’ passed by, but did not find them ‘locked in that last embrace’. (In fact the boys were only two hundred metres from a track daily frequented by timber-getters). Although ‘Alice’ gestures at the world to come – ‘passed in painless sleep/ Up to a brighter home’ – she quickly turns back to earth to praise the searchers who, ‘fruitless efforts past’, now gather around a grave. Sentimental on first appearance, and stilted in measure and diction, this ‘In Memoriam’ nevertheless does not make any easy lapse into religiosity.

On 27 September, the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* described the three boys in death as ‘lying closely huddled together, as if the children had by the warmth afforded by each other endeavoured to ward off the bitter winter cold’. This imagined picture proffers only a sentimental consolation, at once undercut by the frightfully detailed prose account that accompanied it and concluded ‘corruption was claiming them for its own’). A note on sentimentality, the form of consolation so temptingly near at hand in cases of lost children, or perhaps bereavement in general: essentially it is closest to the vice of covetousness, expressing a wish to possess something on false terms. The typical outcome of lost child stories was more austere: taking on the contours of legend, becoming communal possessions, these stories were admonitory rather than sentimental, praising fortitude, rather than gesturing at heaven. The engraving by Samuel Calvert (most likely based on a photograph of the death scene rather than a later visit to it) excised all the horrors of the deaths. The hollow tree is in the centre of the composition. The bodies are scarcely discernible. A single searcher starts back from them, more in surprise than in shock. The illustration is elegiac. It functions almost as a benediction. Literally it has prepared the ground, limned the scene, for those who came later and who have more fortunate outcomes to describe than was the case for the Daylesford children.

Yet surely it was the grim fate of the little boys that was in the mind of Marcus Clarke when – soon afterwards, in April 1869, in the *Colonial Monthly*, his short story ‘Pretty Dick’ was published. This is the tale of a boy who is enticed – as so many of the lost children apparently were – across a creek into the beckoning land

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of promise beyond, 'a strange, dangerous, fascinating, horrible place'. His mother has interdicted such an adventure, but a subtle bush perfume beckons Dick onwards, to trespass through disobedience and – in consequence – to be lost. That is the condition to which Dick wakes some time later. He dreads the loss of all that might have consoled him:

No more mother's kisses, no more father's caresses, no more songs, no more pleasures, no more flowers, no more sunshine, no more love – nothing but grim Death, waiting remorselessly in the iron solitude of the hills.

Dick's prayers to God to take him home go unanswered.

That imaginative facility which had led Dick towards the ranges now torments him. The form that it takes is expressionistic, summoning terrors for which before he had only had names. Thus the boy

Was dimly conscious that any moment some strange beast – some impossible monster, enormous and irresistible, might rise up out of the gloom of the gullies and fall upon him, – that the whole horror of the bush was about to take some tangible shape and appear silently from behind the awful rocks which shut out all safety and succour.

What might seem 'the nameless terror of a solitude' is, for Dick, 'a silence teeming with monsters'. No author of the colonial period in Australia went further than Clarke in investigating and envisaging the mental torments of the lost child. Necessarily, in this solitary predicament, he is unconsoled and inconsolable. In an important sense this portrayal of Dick was part of Clarke's Romantic programme for Australian literature. The sensibility of the child is given the central place which might have been accorded it in the poetry of Blake or Wordsworth. Typically, Australian authors abandon lost children to their fate. Once strayed they are ignored until found, alive or dead. The narrative interest is in those outcomes, and the lessons to be drawn from them, as well as the search which went before. Far from deferring the pains of the child's death, Clarke's story intensifies them by

its depiction of Dick's dreadful fancies, by filling a blank space in the conventional form of the lost child narrative. Dick conjures up a monster of whose lineaments literature and folk lore have given him foreknowledge: 'He pictured the shapeless Bunyip lifting its shining sides heavily from the bottomless blackness of some lagoon in the shadow of the hills'. Feeling suffocated, Dick screams to break the silence, only to hear his cry echoed 'by strange voices never heard before'.

He staggers on, his strength deserting him. Falling asleep, he dreams of the 'happy boy' he once had been. At dawn, Dick has an uncanny experience. If the text offered any more than the most perfunctory consolation, it would be as if his soul had already left his body. Seemingly detached from that body, 'up in the pure cool sky, looking down upon a little figure that lay on an open space among the heather', Dick is attempting to release himself from earthly pains. Yet that relief is temporary. The discovery that the figure whom he has been observing is himself is a 'terrible shock, and he was Lost again'. There is a further shock for the reader. Dick has been given a deranging premonition of how his body will appear when it is found. In another disturbing and literary sense, he has seen himself in the form of the lost child which conventional narratives of the business construct: abandoned, possibly beyond help, voiceless, lying as if or in fact asleep. In all these respects he is far from the hyperactively, tormentedly imaginative creature whom Clarke depicts.

Heat, hunger, terror, loneliness wear Dick down. Clarke suggests that the child loses the sense of who or where he was: 'He had almost forgotten, indeed, that there was such a boy as Pretty Dick. He seemed to have lived years in the bush alone'. Moreover, this is a condition that has come to feel natural to him. He has given up the wish to get away. Before much more time passes, and while 'crooning a little song', Dick goes down 'into the Shadow'. On the sixth day of the search his body is found, head on arm as if asleep, 'in the long grass at the bottom of a gully in the ranges'. One almost suspects the last words of 'Pretty Dick' of irreverence, if not of outright insolence: 'God has taken him home'. The gesture at comfort is self-mocking. No easy closure for such tragic accounts of lost children is plausible, or kind.

If God chose not to save ‘Pretty Dick’ (and Clarke is sardonically alert to the matter of theodicy), no human was responsible for the boy’s desolating end. Clarke’s story is symptomatic of, and contributes to a breakdown of conventional, Christian notions of consolation for such a loss. But no person was to blame. Later in the century this begins to change, in a harrowing fashion that prefigures the Australian world to come in the second half of the twentieth century, and the fate of children within it. The bush balladeers (a limiting description that does justice to only part of their work) also turned to the theme of the lost child towards the end of the nineteenth century – Lawson, ‘Banjo’ Paterson, Will Ogilvie and Barcroft Boake among them. The latter, whose verse collection was mordantly titled *Where the Dead Men Lie* (1897), was another of that century’s suicides among poets, together with James Lionel Michael and Adam Lindsay Gordon. Boake hanged himself with the lash of his stock whip in the scrub at Long Bay.

I want to talk of one of his less well known poems, first printed as ‘Deserted: As Seen at Devlin’s Siding’. The dramatic situation described in the poem involves a desertion – more specifically a mother’s abandonment of her infant. The beginning is interrogative:

What made the porter stare so hard? What made the porter
stare
And eye the tall young woman and the bundle that she bore?

Why does she ‘flush, and strive to hide her face’ as the train from which she has alighted leaves the platform. Boake’s insistent question, posed in various forms in the first twelve of the poem’s thirteen couplets, concerns the mother’s motive rather than the act itself. The questions press relentlessly in on her. What makes her look stealthily up and down before giving her breast to the infant ‘to still its puny whine?’ Why were the saw-millers absent that day: ‘They might have turned a woman from a woeful deed’. Nature was indifferent: ‘why was the place so lone/ That nothing but the soldier-birds might hear a baby moan?’

Nothing, human or otherwise, that might have interfered prevents the imminent death of the infant, which the mother now removes from her breast. To blame for this domestic tragedy is the

unnamed man ‘who made of her a harlot’. Remembering her fall, the woman reacts melodramatically. She moans, grinds her teeth and curses. The account of the actions that follow is more disturbing because it is more deliberate and restrained. She falls on her knees and ‘[scrapes] a cradle in the sand’. Shuddering at the ‘buzz of eager flies’, the mother binds a handkerchief across the eyes of the sleeping infant. At the moment when she is about to abandon the child, she is still solicitous for it, twining ‘fragrant fronds of pine’ to shield the baby from ‘the burning sun’.

There will be no reprieve for it, either providential or of any other kind. The woman ‘strides the platform’, trying hard not to think ‘That somewhere in the scrub is a baby calling her for drink’. The languid breezes sighing through the pine trees set up a refrain ‘that seems to mock her with a baby’s cry’. While Boake now exclaims ‘Seek not to know!’ he has invited us precisely to consider the consequences – not for the child, they are simple – but for the person who abandons it. The ending of the poem is harsh. The woman returns ‘to face the world again’. For her there is no release in pious words, or the comfort of an understanding community with which she can grieve, or even yet in death. The child has been ‘lost’ through human agency, whether its mother or father is ultimately or are equally to blame. We are moving beyond the legendary domain in which lost children figure so prominently and where their losses can be accommodated, if with pain, as a familiar tragedy. Instead, we are coming to a starker place, where an accounting is made for each loss and blame falls – not indifferently on the Australian bush – but on the people who wish themselves free of their children, and of the burdens of a succeeding generation.

Let us return to Lawson’s ‘The Babies in the Bush’. This is an altogether darker version of his earlier poem of the same name. The story’s epigraph returns to the poem and its consolatory epigraph: ‘tell her a tale of the fairies bright -/ That only the Bushmen know’. In conclusion the epigraph reiterates the notion of fairies guiding lost Australian children into the stars, the realm where ‘the Bush-lost babies go’. The story proper begins with the boss-drover, ‘one of those men who seldom smile’. His name – very strangely – is Walter Head, the same as that of Lawson’s friend and editor of *New Australia*, one of whose sons was lost in

the Gippsland bush. The man of that name was now living under another in Hobart. Was Lawson's choice intended to prolong his sorrows, or was it in respectful memory of what Head and his family had suffered? We can't know.

The boss is an admirer of the melancholy, rather than the rousing verse of Gordon. This is the basis of the friendship which he strikes up with the narrator, while they are droving cattle from Queensland to the railhead at Bathurst. The narrator is 'an Australian Bushman' who goes by the name of Jack Ellis. The first story which he hears by way of explanation of the gloomy reserve of the boss, a man 'quietened down by some heavy trouble', marks him as a typical victim of outback life in Australia: 'he had been a well-to-do squatter on the Lachlan river-side ... and had been ruined by drought they said'. Not so: the real, more particular and terrible story will emerge later. At the stage when we meet him, the boss is working for a once penniless man to whom long before he had given a job. 'It's the way of Australia', he ruefully notes. He lives in Bathurst with his wife, and takes Jack to the house once the drive has ended. There is a caution: 'Mrs Head had a great trouble at one time. We – we lost our two children'. It is his hope that his wife gains some comfort from confiding her story to strangers.

When her monologue begins that is how things appear for a while, until the rising note of hysteria overpowers her control of the tale. At first she explains to Jack: 'These town people don't understand. I like to talk to a Bushman. You know we lost our children out on the station. The fairies took them'. Imploringly she asks, 'You surely know about the Bush fairies, Mr Ellis?' He is quick to agree. In the story's reworking of the poem, Mrs Head's mania because of the loss generates what had earlier been a sentimental gesture of consolation. It is a frightful obsession in the story:

at first nothing would drive it out of my head that the children had wandered about until they perished of hunger and thirst in the Bush. As if the Bush Fairies would let them do that.

Steadily, dementedly, she seeks to create a happy alternative to

the tragic familiarities of the story of children lost in the bush. And she is doing it alone. A sympathetic community to receive her suffering and offer consolation lies far away and in the past.

The Head children were named for their parents – Walter and Maggie. That is, they were meant to bear their parents' names and all else that they had inherited from them into the next generation. Those given names were emblematic of a hope of the future that events would soon blast. The loss is accordingly more terrible, not least as we learn of how the father contributed to it. Maggie shows Jack Ellis portraits of her boy and girl, taken when they were two and six months old respectively. They would be lost three years later. Young Walter's portrait moves her to exclaim 'see, he's got one hand and one little foot forward, and an eager look in his eye'. It is as if, indeed, this exemplary young Australian had a future to anticipate.

Later Maggie adverts to affliction by Voices which have told her 'to kill myself; they told me it was all my own fault – that I killed the children'. It was not, of course, her fault, but by transference her husband must be tormented by the accusation. Nor were the black trackers incompetent. An untimely thunderstorm obliterated all traces of the children. How they were eventually found is disclosed by family friend Andy, in the second of the crucial micro-narratives within the story. The bodies were discovered, like those of many strayed children, 'not so very far from home'. They may have wandered a long way, but in a circle. That they were found, Andy insists, was a blessing:

when the bodies aren't found, the parents never quite lose the idea that the little ones are wandering about the Bush tonight (it might be years after) and perishing from hunger, thirst or cold. That mad idea haunts 'em all their lives.

In truth, the Heads are haunted anyway. Or rather, it is as if they are already ghosts. In Andy's sympathetic perception, at least of the husband's plight: 'It's the worst trouble that can happen to a man. It's like living with the dead. It's – it's like a man living with his dead wife'.

As Andy and Jack go down to take the train to Sydney with the

cattle, the boss confides in the latter his culpability in the loss of his children. He was not in Sydney in business as he had told his wife, but ‘on a howling spree’, ‘beastly drunk in an out-of-the-way shanty in the bush’. The additional, terrible detail that he has to remember is of how ‘the old brute’ who ran the shanty never told him of the hunt for the children, thinking that the story was just a trick to get his customer home. Worse yet than that, Walter Head is persuaded that he could have found the lost ones, being an abler bushman than any who searched. Andy’s coda is hardly necessary: ‘that’s the thing that’s been killing him ever since, and it happened over ten years ago’.

The strained, sentimental tone of the poem ‘The Babies in the Bush’ is almost extravagantly dashed by the prose piece of the same name. In the story, lost children make grieving parents mad, as in Maggie’s case (or worse, mad spasmodically, aware of her loss at times) or bereft and guilt-stricken in Walter’s. The delinquency of the latter did not cause the children to stray nor, most likely, did it doom them. Neither thing matters. Walter Head sees himself as guilty. He will not blame a hostile environment to assuage his pains; will not make Australia, or the bush, the culprit. Instead, his slow, melancholy self-destruction, his dwelling on how he has squandered his children’s future presages the transformation of treatments of the lost child which takes place in twentieth-century Australian literature. That business of children lost deliberately by the parental generation, whether they were aborted, abandoned, murdered, or never conceived, is in its own way more terrible than the accident which Walter Head lets slowly exact its mortal toll upon him.

Let me move now towards the end of the last century, and consider one more true story of lost children. On Sunday 29 June 1997, self-styled poet Peter Shoobridge murdered his four daughters as they slept. They were Rebecca (eighteen), Anna (fourteen), Sara (twelve) and Georgia (ten). They had been staying with their father for an access weekend at his house Southernfield, near Cambridge, east of Hobart. After cutting his children’s throats, Shoobridge wrote notes to friends and family to explain himself. Detective Sergeant Tony Bennett said that some of the letters spoke of ‘a cruel world’ in which to bring up children. On 1 July, under the headline ‘Why I Did It’ (the

previous day's had been 'In Cold Blood'), the Hobart *Mercury* quoted from one of the letters, addressed to Wendy (his estranged wife) and the world. Shoobridge wrote that

because of deep, very deep graphic images from the past, present, future, I did not want our girls to face the hardships, tests, rigours, trickery, risks, uncertainties, fears, anxieties of wrong choices legacies, left behind responsibilities, problems, pressures.

And he added: 'I urge every young person to think deeply before bringing children into this world such responsibilities such commitment such pressure'. In the preface to his volume of verse, *A Bush Wedding*, Shoobridge's dedication had been to 'my ever-caring and supportive wife, and four beautiful daughters who provide all the beauty a human being could wish to have'.

After he had finished writing the letters, or those that had not been completed earlier, Shoobridge drove into Cambridge to post them. Stained in blood, they began to turn up at various addresses on the next morning, Monday 30 June. That task completed, Shoobridge returned to his home. There he took an axe and cut off his offending right hand. When police arrived in response to a 000 emergency call made at 6.51 a.m. on the Sunday morning, his hand was found on the chopping block outside his furniture-making workshop. By the time that police reached the property, Shoobridge had shot himself. Perhaps – like those in the nineteenth century who rallied to search for lost children – Shoobridge had also sought to 'save' his daughters. But he did so in a different and terrible way. The late twentieth century in Australia saw expressed in literature and in such acts as this, a desire that a next generation should either not come into being, or should have the lives of its young people shockingly and violently terminated.

These stories are about the rending of communities, rather than the uniting of them. They tell of institutional brutality and of individual perversity, moreover of the suspicions that these engender about a society in which the abuse and loss of children can seem inevitable, if regrettable, and worthy of note mostly for the peculiar horrors that some of the stories reveal. In the second

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half of the twentieth century in Australia, the figure of the lost child is not a revenant from, or an orphan of the colonial past, but someone (or many) vividly and disquietingly presented, perhaps in an anatomy of this society (in fact or fiction or film), or in the probing of the destructive maladies of individuals. And consolation – in those, in these days – seems hardly to be possible. No doubt counselling will be offered, but we may feel that a Christian or a pagan comforting has given place to nihilism and despair.