

HAUNTED COUNTRY: THE LOST HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH

An ambivalent spectre hangs over the Australian landscape. It is a beautiful land, famous for its scale and dryness. But there is a special discomfort wherever white people tread. They do not altogether belong. Australia is a vast land, sparsely inhabited and relatively undifferentiated for thousands of hectares at a stretch. Before the European invasion, it must have been a dry but vibrant garden, each corner of which was known and accorded religious meaning by the Indigenous people.

The colonial encounter with the land involved progressive destruction and degradation. The virgin bush was experienced as an impediment and a threat. With their competitive political and religious outlook, the white settlers cleared as much of the land as they could turn to profit. From the holy geographical perspective of the Aboriginal people, the land was desecrated; and this violation of the cultural space of the Aborigines meant the withdrawal of their food, their way of life and social organization. This story is well known but never altogether past us. The assumption of Australia as *terra nullius* (literally land of no person) lingers in painful ways. Europeans imagine a great Australian 'wilderness', the special virtue of which is its absence of humans and charming dedication to alternative flora and fauna. It is charmingly people-free. The way white people conceive of wilderness, there is actually no space for humans out there. They imagine the bush in ideal terms as untouched by humans.

And so, paradoxically, the human presence in the landscape is anomalous, unless the authorized intrusion of tourism. These are some of the paradoxes explored in *Haunted Country*, a large body of photographic work that Polixeni Papapetrou completed in 2006. The children in her pictures are surrounded by nature, beautiful, perhaps, but mortally risky. The children are mostly white and they do not enjoy a natural relationship with the bush, as tribal Aboriginal children would have done. The photographs reconstruct episodes (mostly real but some fictitious) in which the children got lost in the bush. Many of them perished. Papapetrou has explored the records and visited the sites. In certain cases, the places are still virgin bush where children could easily get lost if separated from their guardians.

Through white children, the most vulnerable tenants of the bush, Papapetrou contemplates visually the historical meaning of the land throughout the period of European occupation. *Haunted Country* is inspired by real and fictional accounts of children who went missing in circumstances too frightening to contemplate. But it is not the children alone who are lost. It is also the land that is imminently to lose its natural condition; and the pictures already presuppose the loss of Aboriginal culture. An exception is the group of touching cases where Aboriginal trackers

located the lost children, as with the Duff children near Horsham.

The works titled *The Wimmera 1864* are based on the story of Isaac, Jane and Frank Duff (all aged between nine and four) who were lost in the western district of Victoria in 1864. The Duff children were found alive by an Aboriginal tracker, King Richard (Woororal) or Dick-a-Dick, after being lost in the bush for nine days. Historians have calculated that they walked more than sixty miles (96 kilometres) during this time. They were without water for five days except for the frost that fell by night, allowing the children to suck the dew off the leaves at morning.

Papapetrou made these photographs at the places where the children ventured, from the site of their hut to the bush beyond, which was—and still is—a maze of harsh dense vegetation and stunted mallee trees. We drove to sites where the children travelled such as the Little Desert (*The Wimmera #1*), where despite the security of being in a car with a local guide and a map, Papapetrou was convinced that we were driving around in circles and felt disoriented the entire time.

Papapetrou dignifies the desultory march of these kids in three heart-breaking stages. First, the children are seen in the Little Desert, whence the broom was gathered. The children are perhaps already lost, as their gait seems to be out of sync, and each person's step is at variance with the other's. The sister still exhibits a certain blithe energy but the boys struggle for direction. The second shows the children resting by a large rock, dejected and yet still heroic, striking the kind of pose that you could imagine white explorers adopting in Edwardian statuary or history painting. In the third, the majesty of the harsh landscape in the heat of the day gives way to a scene of morning, perhaps evoking the moments when the little mouths could suck the dew from the scruffy leaves before it would evaporate in the dry wind. The low light streams in from behind them; the last boy can hardly stagger another pace and a cruciform pair of branches looms as a harbinger of imminent death. Once apprised of the subject matter, it is hard to look at this picture and not pay tribute to Woororal for saving the children.

Such episodes in themselves highlight the passing of tribal skills in Victoria, which rapidly became industrialized. In other cases, the European culture has also been lost. This is quite affecting at a town called Whroo, where the evidence of a gold-mining township is hard to find beyond the cemetery in the middle of the bush. Papapetrou came across the grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*) formerly known as Blackboys, quite by accident. Grass trees are indigenous to Australia and have evolved in isolation to the rest of the world. She was mesmerized by the combination of the exotic beauty of these trees swinging about in the warm golden light.

In *Whroo 1855* Papapetrou hints at the unease of the early European experience of the land and its people. The land was ancient and held more secrets than the white settlers could hope to understand. The white settlers were naïve and to a degree innocent and this is reflected in the faces of these children. Never quite accepted by the land, the white settlers tried to change it; and the land in turn took their children, symbolizing one of the most painful sacrifices made by them in trying to make this land a home away from home. We do not have access to the sacred character of the land as Aboriginal culture understood it; but the atmosphere is moving and it is sometimes possible to feel that the land may not want us to be there. It is hot and the insects are annoying; the ground is swarming with bull ants and the flies and bees are menacing. A kangaroo magically crosses our path and disappears again.

Papapetrou was drawn back to Whroo to make a picture (*Witness 1933*) that

seems to address the theme of memory and loss. Papapetrou said that she felt like a ghost returning to this land. In *Witness* the young girl does return to her home, but as a ghost looking to be reminded of her past. But everything has changed and nothing has remained. All the people who once inhabited this land, both Aboriginal and white have gone. Only the prehistoric trees survive, assembled in a circular community like the trace of ancient corroborees. Almost completing the circle, the girl puts her head in her hands. Everything she once knew has gone. The grass trees stand in solemn guardianship, mute and spiky sentinels, as if superintending the vanity of the hasty people who have come and gone. They are somehow anthropomorphic, with a dark head turned to one another, as they seem to commune in taciturn congress. They do not resemble a forest so much as a society, larger than life, totemic stewards of secret sacred knowledge that you can never fathom by stumbling into them.

Natural features acquire a strange contested air when you have to reckon with their former life and involvement in Indigenous ritual. This is the case with the Yarra River (*By the Yarra 1857*). The Yarra River runs through a large part of the land in inner and outer Melbourne but was central to the Wurundjeri people as it provided a variety of foods such as eels and fish. The great Wurundjeri leader and artist William Barak (c.1824–1903) related how the Yarra River was formed, in the course of which the Spirit Bunjil rescues a boy from the clutches of a malicious old man; when the old man was dragging the boy, a furrow was produced in the earth, which became the River.

In her dramatic sequence of four narrative works, Papapetrou draws upon the creation myth, extrapolating the dangers of the land and the spirit that protects and rescues the little boy.

Sadly, there was neither female help nor spirits to help out with three boys who went missing in the bush at Daylesford. The photographs *Daylesford 1867 #1 and #2* are based on the story of three young boys who wandered into the bush at Daylesford, apparently chasing goats and playing hide and seek. In the first image, the boys scout for resources among a heap of storm-litter; but the eldest seems to have given up. In the second image, the boys succumb to exhaustion in front of their ingenious humpy, which suggests that the boys were reconciled to not being found. Their minor feat of engineering replicates the colonial desire to settle and build.

A huge search was mounted without result. Aboriginal trackers were sent for, but arrived too late as the winter rain had washed away the boys' tracks. You wish that it could be fiction; alas, the boys perished. Some of Papapetrou's stories have an inscrutable balance of fiction and fact, as with the trilogy *Hanging Rock*. Hanging Rock in Victoria certainly exists. It is a ghostly place, one of the world's extraordinary geological formations, created six million years ago by lava rising through the earth's crust. It is the perfect backdrop to set the scene for a classic 'bush lost story', highlighting the clash of transplanted English tradition with the ancient wilderness of Australia.

In making *Haunted Country*, Hanging Rock was one of the first sites that Papapetrou visited. On Valentine's Day in 1900, a party of school girls set out for an excursion at Hanging Rock. Three of the girls who ventured out onto the rock were not seen again. The reason for their disappearance—whether by human intervention or by being swallowed up by the awesomely severe outcrop (raised high up like an archaic altar)—has never been discovered. The story of the missing girls is based on the novel by Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1967. But it

may as well be real, as the story is embedded in our cultural imagination and we believe that it happened. Indeed, the novel's author did little to dispel the myth and she maintained an ambiguous stance throughout her life regarding whether or not the story was based on actual events. Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) continues to be one of the most significant Australian films made to date.

Many of the sites that Papapetrou has explored are eerie theatrical combinations of bush and geological formations, sites which provide a clearing such as is required in a film. This is the case with the strange rocky outcrops of the two works *In the Keilor Plains 1895*. The aptness of such places as a stage for performative lens-capture is more than a coincidence, because they are naturally spooky. In Aboriginal culture, they were prime events, not just places. In our consciousness, we contemplate scientifically how the physical area around Keilor Plains in Victoria was determined about a million years ago when a massive lava flow spread over the plains from nearby volcanic hills. But the plains are interrupted by severe geological forms which have a powerful sense of drama about them, for which the scientific explanations concerning pressure and temperature seem less compelling than the wilful agency of spirits. Papapetrou's two works are based on two siblings who lived in the area and had the freedom to explore the cliffs, gullies and stream in the area. While they may feel at home on the land, in #1 the young girl seems to be listening to sounds that she cannot quite fathom and the little boy seems troubled. The children are not at ease in their new home; and although the young girl has laid down to rest in #2, the bed must be uncomfortable and there is a feeling that the land is about to consume her.

Beyond the historical framework, the theme of loss is used as a metaphor for other ways that children become lost to adults. Papapetrou captures feelings specific to the Australian bush predicament; but the monumental aesthetic extrapolation of the narratives expresses something in relation to children and their eternal vulnerability in both the natural and social orders. The episodes in the harsh Australian landscape allow Papapetrou to reflect upon their dependence, their codes of contact with one another and our paradoxical remoteness from them. In the artful and sometimes filmic treatment of the country, the landscape acts metaphorically. It becomes a cipher for the social distancing that naturally happens with all children. For example, children also become lost to our affection or lost to media. The Australian landscape brings this out, with its inscrutable visual scruffiness as a perpetual barrier to symbolic ownership, and a sign of historical embarrassment.

European Australians always nurture a deep-seated dread of a landscape that is somehow beyond us, an ancient land that is not altogether ours, and which threatens to engulf us with its enormous scale and absence of landmarks. It can be understood best through feeling the impact that the land has upon children. This theme has been the subject of a number of Australian novels, *Remembering Babylon* (David Malouf 1993). It has also inspired non-fiction genres, as with *The country of lost children: An Australian Anxiety*, (Peter Pierce 1999) and *Babes in the Bush: The Making of an Australian Image* (Kim Torney 2005). There are many paintings (e.g. Frederick McCubbin's) and films such as *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins 2000) and *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg 1971). The theme has not been explored in photography, where—with all the evidential resonances of the genre—it fits so well.

In *Haunted Country*, Papapetrou has photographed children in clothing of different periods. Brought up on a filmic diet of stories being 'set' in this epoch or that, the little histrions relish the act: they know how to look indisposed, stranded, exhausted, desperate; and for the rest, the photographer knows how to capture them as

seduced by the heady beauty of the light and land, which is toyed with a great deal in the visual language of film. Through the densely enfolded layers of true feeling and make-believe, the children and artist alike are spellbound. It would have been very different for the original children, as opposed to the actors: the distraction of the bush had few lyrical dimensions and was the fatal cause of their perdition. Or maybe they really interpreted the land as their playground, catastrophically, rather than something to be respected. So in the visually sumptuous photographs, the scene is sometimes a painful *vanitas*.

But Papapetrou also prevents us from demonizing nature, as if it is the devil which has seduced the children with its bounteous space, and then taken them into a Hell of disorientation and isolation. You could almost imagine that the loss of children could have fortified the conviction of tree-hating farmers, who would have loathed the bush as the tomb of lost children, thus morally justifying the physical destruction of the forest as a damnable place, an aesthetically abject and deadly horror that called for the civilizing hand of agriculture. And with this missionary zeal in steadfast opposition to wilderness went the extirpation—conscious or otherwise—of the Indigenous people from their hunting lands.

I think that partly for this reason, Papapetrou extends the narrative of *Haunted Country* from old stories about being lost in the bush to more modern stories where children have mysteriously disappeared from the land, from the beach, from a park, most likely through adult mischief or malice. The inclusion of such scenes, implied by their modernity and cheerfully playful children—poised to become victims—is congruent with the subtext that looks at the loss of children on a more metaphorical plane, less literal and more resonant in the horror of letting go or exposing children to risk. No one looking after children is without the agony of how much the children should be exposed to risk.

Most of the accounts that Papapetrou has staged (pre-eminently the ‘bush lost’ children stories) have historically united the nation. People rallied from far and wide, including the Aboriginal trackers, as noted. As in the Romantic tradition of *Kindertotenlieder*, nature was apparently responsible for engulfing the vulnerable young; no one was at fault and the best will was directed to recover the little people and, where this was too late, to express sympathy. The more recent accounts of the disappearance of children have divided the nation, and negative feelings abound.

The more modern stories share the opposite motif: the children disappeared from public places. An example is the three Beaumont children who vanished from a popular beach in South Australia in 1966; another is the Landos disappearance at Erskine River in 1973. The disappearance of even smaller children has been divisive in an ugly way, especially the story of Azaria Chamberlain (Uluru 1980) and Jaidyn Leskie (Moe 1997) in which, it appears, each Australian considered himself or herself a *de facto* judge and juror. The case of the Beaumont family has been considered as a historical watershed as recently as this year, where an article in *The Age* in Melbourne (21 January 2006) described the date, Australia Day 1966, the moment at which Australian children lost their innocence. From that time on, Australian children were taught never to talk to strangers. In the meanwhile, and slowly over the years, children are watched more closely. Papapetrou reflects on this in *She saw two girls and a boy*, where she photographed our children together with one of their friends. As a mother, she found this story very confronting, compounded by the fact that as a young girl, she experienced the news story at the time.

The greater contemporary poignancy of these abduction stories relative to the bush-lost stories has cultural origins, which Papapetrou again tackles in *Erskine Falls 1973*. In 1973, a teenage boy was holidaying with the family at the Erskine River caravan park near Lorne in Victoria. The teenager went for a walk and never came back. It seems likely that the child was abducted. Papapetrou has left many of the real facts out of this narrative and created her own, so that the work functions less as literal documentary and speaks more of how we feel when a child goes missing: how does it affect us and how does it affect the community?

Papapetrou does not want to illustrate these stories as if some kind of belated photo-reportage. Her interpretation of children disappearing avoids the journalistic character of controversy. She is more interested in how the lost children functioned symbolically in the historical understanding of country and community. In this, the fictional story of Hanging Rock provides a curious moment. The disappearance of children at Hanging Rock would have occurred in 1900 and the account already presents some discord, as do the later twentieth-century child disappearance stories. Perhaps Hanging Rock can be viewed as a turning point. It is haunted by collusion and collective irresponsibility. But it is hard to judge whose irresponsibility. The children were apparently drawn by the headiness of the site and gave themselves to the stony spirits. In Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, this is expressed with a sacrificial sense of erotic abandon, symbolized by the naked feet of the girls, who are like the beautiful pale heirs of Iphigenia.

On the one hand, we have nineteenth-century accounts which galvanized the community in staunch solidarity against the vicissitudes of bush life, mishap and accidental death; and, on the other hand, we have twentieth century accounts which elicit frustration at not knowing whom to blame: unsympathetic reactions are often aroused and great moral discomfort is experienced. These stories and somewhat intolerant divisions align themselves, roughly speaking, with the controlling anxieties of modernity.

Apart from its poignant iconography, the series represents the artist's return to outdoor photography, which she had pursued in *Elvis Immortal* (1987-1997), but which was held in abeyance during the three bodies of work, *Phantomwise* (2002-2003), *Dreamchild* (2003), and *Wonderland* (2004). Papapetrou abandoned the studio in favour of numerous and often intrepid forays into the Australian landscape—with her family and other children—to confront and absorb the real land by visiting the actual sites where children became lost or, on occasion, perished. The decision to photograph outdoors was integral to the fateful and melancholy histories involved. The artist and her young actors in a sense had to own the real bush, which lies far beyond their urban life.

In *Haunted Country*, Papapetrou is happy to mix real and imaginary accounts and does not distinguish them by title. That is because, in a sense, the two are remarkably close in the experience of rural people; for the fictional stories are also real in a provisional sense, almost a monitory clarion in the bush psyche, that has been kept alive in the Australian imagination. If you venture into the vast Australian bush with a child, you restage in your own mind the paralyzing fear that the child could easily go missing. You would not need to be distracted long. And so, for over a century, Australian parents have re-lived the dread of children being lost when, fortunately, they are perfectly safe. Your anxiety turns out to be purely imaginary but it lies perilously close to a horrific actuality.

The whole of Australia resonates with this dreaded feeling of failed contact, inadequate vigilance, a sublime fear that goes beyond your comprehension.

Haunted Country called for first-hand contact with the bush by the artist and the young actors. In re-enacting the stories, they were able to relive aspects of them and reckon with the heat, the glare, the spiky forest floor, the treacherous delirium, the wind and the silence. And in all of this, they all became horribly conscious that unlike the little people who were their prototypes, they barely experienced a moment of hunger or thirst.

Robert Nelson May 2006

Dr Robert Nelson is Associate Professor, Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University, Melbourne and is art critic for *The Age* newspaper, Melbourne.

© Copyright Polixeni Papapetrou
All rights Reserved
Printed from <http://www.polixenipapapetrou.net/>