

Did it really happen?: Picnic at Hanging Rock.

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## *Did It Really Happen?: Picnic at Hanging Rock*

**AUSTRALIAN FICTION   FILM**

Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which turns fifty this year, owes a share of its longevity to the modern folklore of vanished white women that has swirled around sites like Hanging Rock in Victoria's Macedon Ranges since the nineteenth century. Lindsay's Gothic legend still clings to this unique rock formation. The tale's enduring appeal and unsettling allure arises from a mist of fact and fiction, casting

a magic unspoiled even by the kitsch tourist injunction at Hanging Rock Reserve to 'Experience the Mystery.' No matter how often the story is demystified, its ghost lives on in urban legend, with all the appearance of an actual unsolved crime. The mystery lives on in the inescapable question: *did it really happen?*

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*Valentine's Day, 1900.* A party of female students from a private women's college in Woodend, north of Melbourne, disappear on an excursion to Hanging Rock. The youngest, Edith Horton, emerges from the scrub near the base of the Rock in a dress torn to ribbons, crying and laughing hysterically. The missing victims—Miranda, Irma Leopold, Marion Quade, Miss Greta McCraw—vanish without a trace. Days later, Edith tells police she last saw Miss McCraw, the governess, in her underwear. A week later, Irma Leopold, the wealthy heiress, is found unconscious and unscathed on the Rock, with no recollection of what happened. The other girls are never heard from again. Were they abducted? Raped? Murdered? Swallowed by a cleft in the Rock?

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The Gothic tale unnerves us by isolating facts from their cause or explanation, suspending the known world over an abyss of radical doubt. The stable order of reasoned certainties is jolted out of its grooves by dark and mysterious forces. The suspense aroused by the deepening mystery is nearly unbearable. In the iconic image of virgins rising the prehistoric monolith, long suppressed fears of a devilish menace in the Australian landmass, aroused by the presence of colonial intruders and intent on sacrificial retribution, rise to the surface.

Lindsay's fiction of unexplained facts is so compelling that, for many, it *must* be true, as if the ghosts of the missing girls had dictated the story to the author, who reportedly penned it with demonic speed in a matter of weeks. The story-behind-the-story canard precedes the novel like a press release, relieving sightseers of the burden of reading it. The reportage style the novel briefly adopts to relate the College mystery ('GIRL'S BODY ON ROCK - MISSING HEIRESS FOUND,' begins chapter nine), and the imitation of police report and witness testimony, hooks readers into playing detective. The book's knack for turning the ardent reader into the amateur sleuth has not waned. If anything, the digitization of the National

Archive, combined with the smartphone illusion that the answer is always near at hand, has only added to the legend, giving rise to the incongruous sight of freelance journalists in cold-case pursuit of the missing girls after the Australian Ghost Hunters Society has accepted the story as fiction.

In *Beyond the Rock: The Life of Joan Lindsay and the Mystery of Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Janelle McCulloch claims to have solved the mystery. The details are sketchy, following as they do a trail that begins and ends with Lindsay. McCulloch seizes on the sentence Lindsay deleted from the novel's foreword—'For the author, who knew Mount Macedon and the Hanging Rock very well, as a child, the story is entirely true'—as if it were a forensic breakthrough in the case: 'Why would Lindsay write this line if the story were fictional?' She dredges up an unsolved case from an old police gazette in the archives; before long, we are back in the spiritualist fog that still hangs over novel and author alike: mostly reports from the film set of Peter Weir's 1975 adaptation that wristwatches stopped near the Rock and around Lindsay herself, in imitation, it seems, of the novel (and Lindsay's memoir, for that matter). McCulloch's conviction about Lindsay's mystical acumen is on par with tourist reports of communing with the ghosts of the girls at Hanging Rock. The Daily Telegraph covered the 'breakthrough' in April this year; an extract from McCulloch's book surfaced in the *Good Weekend*, aptly enough, on April Fool's Day.

Librarians at the State Library of Victoria have grown accustomed to handling the *Picnic* enthusiast possessed of the fiercely original idea of investigating the mystery for themselves. Reaction to the news of the novel's basis in imaginative fiction, not fact, ranges, according to Rowena Gilbert, from tearful chagrin and fits of pique to flat denial. McCulloch, presumably, is in denial.

In my yellowing Penguin paperback, the following author's note comes after the cast of players:

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**Whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in the year nineteen hundred, and all the characters who appear in this book are long since dead, it hardly seems important.**

Lindsay's note hits the mark, making the trompe-l'oeil effects of postmodern fiction look like card tricks. The story's authenticity is won by discarding the truth as old news. Her later hints in the direction of spiritualism blot the Borgesian signature but seal the urban legend, like her remark to a Melbourne *Herald* journalist in 1975 that

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**I can't tell you whether the story is fact or fiction; but a lot of very strange things have happened around the area of Hanging Rock—things that have no logical explanation.**

Whether Lindsay believed in the supernatural hardly matters, to adopt the dismissive gesture of her foreword: readers must decide for themselves.

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The supernatural school was given a decent pair of wings by sci-fi author Yvonne Rousseau. In her 1980 study *The Murders at Hanging Rock*, Rousseau granted the fictional basis of the story at the outset—before presenting several competing accounts of the girls' fate, including parallel universe and UFO abduction event. The whole process of academic and amateur detection is spoofed. Lindsay fans had already proven bold enough to remind her in writing of the rules of the genre. The volume of fan mail increased with the new attention the novel received after the international success of the film. Lindsay reportedly approved of the film, if not the extra mail. After years of unwelcome advice on how she should have concluded the story, she retrieved the discarded final chapter from the bottom drawer. Weary of the charge that she had forgotten to solve the story or just blundered it, the sealed chapter was released in 1987. Anyone who has read 'The Secret of Hanging Rock,' however, will be grateful to the editors at Angus & Robertson who convinced Lindsay to discard it twenty years earlier. Any resolution to the mystery was sure to be an anti-climax, but the solution offered in the sealed chapter—that two of the girls kneel on the rock and are transported to another dimension—is incongruous with the world established in the story, and reads, bizarrely enough, like a mashup novel written by Yvonne Rousseau.

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The truth of *Picnic* is not rendered tangible by old newspaper reports of unsolved crimes at Hanging Rock, even if there were any. Solutions are banal, even a distraction; but the gap, like the Rock, remains. It lures us into the space of interpretation as surely as it lures the girls up the mountain. It is the enigma of art itself, which renews its riddle to every passing inquirer. The truth of *Picnic*, in other words, lies in its art. We can baldly summarise it as the conviction, witnessed across a lifetime of friendships and aesthetic experiences, in the emptiness of all knowledge that denies the spiritual life. That Lindsay relates this metaphysical knowledge to the slow experience of time, a time without clocks, in the title of her memoir, gives the opening line of the novel its special ring: 'Everyone agreed that the day was just right for the picnic to Hanging Rock.'

Historical and biographical facts dot the frame, as is always the case. Appleyard College vaguely resembles Clyde Girls Grammar School in leafy East St. Kilda (which Lindsay duxed in 1913), even more so when, in 1919, it relocated to the Woodend-Macedon area, where the colonial gentry built their mansions and Melbournians escaped the city's heat on weekend getaways. Hanging Rock, formed by ancient volcanic forces, crouches opposite Macedon like a primeval god. The contrast couldn't be starker. An Edwardian education for young ladies against the backdrop of leisurely Macedon and the brooding, ancient rock provided Lindsay with the means, as she put it, 'to translate a long-seen vision into words.'

Late in the novel there is a reference to a 1914 newspaper article which implies that a historical truth behind the fictional one was in reach. The article still hasn't surfaced. It was actually an incident recorded in the Clyde School Magazine that supplied the scaffold for the novel's pivotal event. That article narrates a school excursion to Hanging Rock from Woodend in 1919 led by one Miss McCraw; the party's difficulty crossing a stream in the late afternoon; and the return of the girls at nightfall, frowzy and hatless. The tradition of telling spooky stories on the way back from picnics at Hanging Rock, which continued for another forty years, dates from this time.

Lindsay's urban myth 'effect' is neither accident nor occult, then, but material. Her only novel traverses the dream space of the inner life by treading lightly over 'the silent hours between midnight and dawn' when 'the human spirit wanders farthest.' Like the bush that terrifies Richard Somers in D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, the Rock

is radically other to the hot-housed maidenliness of the College. The unspoken and unspeakable mystery at the heart of things, the dark reality of the Rock that must be kept at a distance, is where the real power of Lindsay's narrative art lies. It reaches the reader in the voice of Doctor McKenzie's advice to the traumatised Irma: 'don't think about the Rock.'

## The shadow of the Rock



When the shadow the Rock casts over the College is read only for clues in a whodunit, the meaning of the story, its mystical and moral drama, vanishes along with the girls. Focussed tightly on the mystery plot, the amateur sleuth misses the clues leading back to the College. It is not by accident that the narrator refers to the 'pattern' of events that unfold after the College scandal breaks, or enjoins us to keep an eye on the 'unseen, unrecorded, pattern of the picnic' as it continues 'to spread and darken' even to the lives of those on its 'outer circumference.' The metaphysical scale of the pattern is felt by Mademoiselle de Poitiers as she gazes at the sunlit face of the Rock, wondering 'how anything so beautiful could be the instrument of evil.' It encompasses not just the lives 'disrupted, sometimes violently,' of minor characters, but 'the lives of innumerable lesser fry—spiders, mice, beetles—whose scuttlings, burrowings and terrified retreats are comparable, if on a smaller scale.' The Rock comes to stand for the pattern of fate, visible in the symbolic contrast between ancient rock and modern college, that culminates in the destruction of Appleyard

College.

An Italianate mansion in the scrub, Appleyard College is grotesquely out of place in the bush, bordered by 'stringy-barked eucalypts' and sloping into an 'insignificant creek.' It is, even in 1900, 'a hopeless misfit in time and place,' a gothic rupture not fully captured by the film's setting at Martindale Hall. Its forbidding Headmistress, Mrs Appleyard, 'with her high-piled greying pompadour and ample bosom, as rigidly controlled and disciplined as her private ambitions,' has an eye for commercial opportunity as sharp as any Go8 Vice-Chancellor's. She plays the role of middle class respectability for a status-conscious Melbourne so well that no one questions her educational attainments. Her hatred of the Rock and retreat behind College walls expresses her faith in money and class, the tightly controlled world of deportment and propriety she imagines will protect her from life's hazards. The commercial values and insular culture of colonial Melbourne is discredited in the deterioration, bordering on madness, of Mrs Appleyard.

The Rock springs from the same ancient ground on which Appleyard sits so uneasily, representing all of nature in its awful otherness and unfathomable creative power. When Miranda takes the fateful decision to continue up its craggy trail, she seems to know something of its mysteries that the rest of us don't. Waking before the others on a stone shelf, she has an epiphany. The dull assortment of nearby entities—the beetles at her feet; the bird nest above; Irma's ringlets; Edith's flushed slumber; etc—resolve into a mystical insight into the fullness of creation. As Miranda leads the two older girls up the monolith, Edith's cries, strangled by a frilled lace collar, reach her as if from a vast distance.

Miranda is possessed of a spirituality that links her to the Rock. Even before her disappearance, she is more ideal than individual, obliging us to read the other characters in relation to her. Her radiant presence is described in images of sunlight and physical grace, and overflows in small acts of kindness to all in her orbit. The French governess, Mademoiselle de Poitiers, catches a glimpse of it as Miranda glides by the creek towards the Rock; but this knowledge 'of things that really mattered' is impossible to explain to the mathematical mistress, Miss McCraw. Moments later, Irma is moved to tears at the sight of Miranda stroking Edith's burning forehead with 'an unreasoning tender love,' which inspires her to an enraptured dance.

The unreasoning love radiating from Miranda represents the union of beauty and goodness, of erotic and agapic love, that outstrips the straitlaced regime of Appleyard, recalled here by Edith's distress at the sight of Miranda and Marion, shoeless and unstockinged, up a gumtree. The girl with the Botticelli smile is raised on the land, in more salubrious environs than the heavy-curtained gloom of Appleyard. Naturally herself in all settings, as graceful on horseback as in the drawing room, she crosses the stream moments earlier with a swanlike poise that pierces the heart of the watching Mike Fitzhubert. The young English aristocrat carries the blissful wound like a troubadour, endangering his own life in a return search of the Rock and spending the rest of it in Queensland, in faithful devotion to the angel glimpsed in the rushes. The theme of erotic mysticism plays out in Michael's pursuit of the unattainable ideal of love, symbolised by the swan that beckons him in his dreams.

Miranda moves through the College without ever being a part of it. She is *in* the world but not *of* it, expressing 'a doctrine nowhere inconsistent with St. Augustine's Christianity,' Rousseau notes. On one view, the girls' disappearance is deliverance not tragic loss or rape of innocence, their fluid steps up the Rock retracing, as Anne Crittenden observed, the allegorical ascent to the divine in Christian and Neoplatonic theology from Dante to Ficino.





Of all the girls, it is Miranda who shines brightest in the thoughts of those she leaves behind, especially Sara Waybourne (who penned her a valentine). The 13-year-old orphan is stopped from joining the picnic by the mean-spirited headmistress and spends the duration of events locked in her room, pining for Miranda and grating on the nerves of Mrs Appleyard. Rejecting Sara's Ode to Valentine for rote learning Felicia Heymans, whose angels were more domestic than divine, Mrs Appleyard increases Sara's misery by cancelling her art lessons. Sara's suicide is linked obscurely to the disappearances at Hanging Rock, forming part of the unseen 'pattern' of divine retribution—bush retribution, as Rousseau has it—or poetic justice.

Mrs Appleyard is not just a stuffy headmistress with big hair. Sara's death is at her door. The orphan's bedroom detention is a microcosm of Appleyard, where the stifling air robs 'inmates' of genuine education. The disciplinary regime at Appleyard, associated as it is with the rational ideals of modern culture, is presented as inadequate to (transcendent) nature when the girls are packed off to measure the Rock with compass and ruler. Appleyard, in its spiritless rationality, is no match for the incalculable power of the Rock, and represents, for Crittenden, the death instinct.

As the College faces ruin, Irma returns to farewell the other girls – only to be mobbed. It is not hard to see darker threads in the 'pattern' weaving through this scene. The College's phony decorum is no match for the repressed erotic power of its inmates, which explodes in hysteria. Unnerved at this turn of events, the junior governess, Dora Lumley, leaves the College with her brother Reg only to die with him in a hotel fire later that night. (The two were planning to live together with their old aunt, Reg having sent Dora her only valentine.) Sara disappears the same evening, after Mrs Appleyard points her back to the orphanage with an unpaid fee notice. When Sara's corpse is discovered in a flower bed beneath the College tower, Mrs Appleyard, driven to Woodend to inform police, changes route to Hanging Rock, known to her only in the form of sketches by local artists. As the Rock looms into view, she raises a clenched fist at it and a grimace so ghastly her buggy driver later records the hope, in a police statement, to never again witness 'an expression like that on another face.' In a scene cut from the film, the 57-year-old headmistress, 'after a lifetime of linoleum and asphalt and Axminster carpets,' at last treads 'the springing earth.' Driven on by a vision of Sara and the Rock, which blur into one

dreadful image, she strikes at a sleeping black spider before pitching herself into the valley below, only coming to rest when one of the Rock's jutting crags impales her head. A year later, the College burns to the ground in a bushfire.

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With the destruction of Appleyard and the restoration of nature's sovereignty the pattern is complete. But questions remain. Irma's reappearance poses a mystery smoothed over in the sweep of allegory. Although a week has passed, Irma suffers no ill effects from her ordeal. She is not hungry or dehydrated. Her corset is missing. Her shoeless feet, with which she ascended the Rock and danced on it like a maenad, are, mystifyingly, as clean as they were on the day she was born. A missing corset might be politely overlooked, but spotless feet? Has she been transported to another dimension? Not lost in the bush but walking in time, in Philip Adams' phrase?

The disharmony in nature caused by the deathly grip of Appleyard on its young women raises Lindsay's short novel to the level of cosmic drama. Her great theme, time, measured not by the clock but nature's seasonal, cyclical transformation calls for the dramaturgy of myth and symbol. The mystery and mysticism of the story emerges from the ineffable relation to time, the *nunc stans*, which even ockerish Albert Crundall feels it in a fleeting exchange with Irma Leopold:

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**There is no single instant on this spinning globe that is not, for millions of individuals, immeasurable by ordinary standards of time: a fragment of eternity forever unrelated to the calendar or the striking clock.**

The time of the picnic, the natural, transfigurative time of death and rebirth, hinted at in the symbolism of Valentine's Day—with its roots in the Lupercalia, the Roman fertility festival Christianised by the early Church—is immeasurable, which is why, at midday, the clocks stop. The mathematical Greta McCraw puts it down to magnetic forces, unaware that the kairoic propensities of nature can't be measured chronologically. Mathematical or clock time, the invention of science imposed on the temporal flux, is revealed not merely as artificial, but, in its reduction of experience to measurable units, as unnatural and destructive. The culture out of sync

with seasonal time is doomed; raising itself above the plenipotentiaries of nature, it is destined to be laid waste by them.

Greta and Marion represent the modern personality type who loses the moment in the act of measuring its uses, the type dubbed the 'time-keeper' in Lindsay's memoir. We cannot inhabit clock-time, or even experience it, except, perhaps, as the destruction of experience. The ticking of the clock, the parsing of life into identical units, is the period of hell. Mrs Appleyard is identified with the madness of such mechanical time, which eventually—and literally—does her head in. (All injuries inflicted by the Rock are to the head.) Haunting the College's gloomy interiors, she begins to hear through the walls 'the everlasting tick-tock' of the hall clock, sounding 'minute by minute, hour by hour, like a heart beating in a body already dead.' Her puzzlement centres at one point on Greta. How her 'mathematical mistress,' on whose 'masculine intellect' she had come to rely, 'should have allowed herself to be spirited away... on the Hanging Rock' is as incomprehensible to her as the Rock itself.

Miranda aligns herself with natural time when she discards the time-piece worn against her beating heart as unbearable. It was Marion who proposed a closer look at the Rock, with a punctual eye on the geology assignment due the next day; but Miranda who led the ascent. The girls do not chart their exit from the repressive College with the tools of science, as Elspeth Tilley suggests, but are led away in a trance, against their reason, in divine folly. A pulsating sound from the distant plains reaches the girls 'like the beating of far off drums,' as if the semi-circular rock shelf marked out the space of a corroboree already underway.

Sacred sites like Hanging Rock were the setting of sexual initiation ceremonies in Aboriginal culture for millennia, forming the prehistory of the girls' encounter with the mystery. The doctor's inspection of Irma's hymen rules out the possibility of sex crime but rules in some notion of initiation into the mysteries. The suggestion lingers in the background of the hysteria scene, when an emboldened Edith sniffs out Irma's new 'knowledge.' All the girls respond to some spiritual call in the land (excepting Edith, for whom the Rock is 'nasty'). Their 'punishment' concerns no moral shortcoming, then, but an encounter with the deepest mystery, with the transfigurative truth of eternity that unites life and death in the universal substance. Small wonder that Irma forgets the experience. What today would be called

Lindsay's ecopoetics intimates at a mingling of flesh and land, the dreaming of the land itself, out of Aboriginal lore. When the picnic scene is read as unconscious ritual, the girls' ignorance of and mesmeric response to the land and its local divinities enacts, as Rousseau has it, 'the initiation of our impermanent shadowy land into the knowledge of the colonial flesh which is wandering there.' In the monstrous figure of the Rock the colonial-enlightenment project is indigenized from within.

## Must Miranda go?

The unseemly obsession with the fictional ghosts of young white women at the expense of Indigenous ones is now the target of activists on social media. The [#mirandamustgo](#) campaign calls on Australians to 'stop telling fairy-tales and start facing up to their past.' Led by artist Amy Spiers, campaigners see in Lindsay's novel and its lasting popularity an obsessive retelling of the nineteenth-century settler myth of white vanishing, which they denounce as concealing the brutal historical realities of settlement. Determined to shush the yearlong cry of 'Miranda!' by tourists to the Rock, activists held their own Anti-Picnic at the site on 14 February, the date on which events in the novel turn.

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**We gathered to contest the site's habitual associations with Joan Lindsay's novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and instead draw attention to the real losses and traumas Aboriginal people have experienced due to European settlement.**

A play by Elseph Tilley (author of the monograph *White Vanishing*) was performed in anti-commemoration. Tilley's *How it Goes* stages the original sin of settlement as political farce, right down to the stock cast of VISITORS ('heavily armed... feeling entitled'), HOMEOWNERS ('comfortably at home in their country, then perplexed... angry and sardonic'), WHITE ACADEMIC ('well-intentioned, somewhat disillusioned and occasionally patronising'), and ARTIST ('Persistent. Tenacious. Pragmatic.') White villains, black victims, disillusioned academic, heroic artist: the bull's eye painted on the VISITORS is as big as the laurel awarded the ARTIST.

Critique here teeters on self-parody. *Picnic*'s invitation to extend its exercise in self-criticism is declined in favour of debunking the reactionary values hidden in the pleated skirts and ribboned bonnets of costume drama. As a result, Anti-Picnickers barely lay a silk glove on the novel.

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**The goal in removing pervasive associations to Lindsay's story, and its main character Miranda, is to prompt questions about the dominant culture's obsession with the fictional vanishing of white schoolgirls while actively ignoring the removal and displacement of Aboriginal people and culture which actually took place.**

In fact, the campaign is not really aimed at the novel at all, but at the kitschifying of country by tourist operators following the success of Peter Weir's film. If the proposal to remove a fictional character from a real site is as ludicrous as it sounds, then the goal of widening the touristic narrative to include the Indigenous history of Hanging Rock is not only realistic but overdue. Spiers' campaign and Tilley's play might fail as criticism but they succeed as polemic. The moustache painting of Miranda, the Botticelli angel of Australia literature, only confirms her classic status.



Fan fixation with the ethereal Miranda was inspired not by Lindsay's heroine but Weir's. The celluloid Miranda has displayed a longevity unusual even for a landmark film. Actor Anne Louise Lambert, now in her sixties, is still accosted by strangers in the street and garlanded with fresh tributes. The 'warm loving hugs' the retired actor receives from film fans moved her to remark in a recent interview that Miranda 'certainly made the world a friendlier place for me.' The message of the film for Lambert is ecological insofar as it appreciates Hanging Rock as 'valuable in itself' and urges a duty of care on us all in the name of future generations. The critical juncture Anti-Picnickers seek is not on site at Hanging Rock, however, but waiting for them back at Appleyard College. A closer look at life under its corseted regime, amidst its cedar staircases, grand pianos and classical statues reveals a more devastating satire of settler culture than Tilley's farce.

Lindsay was no enthusiast for muslin dresses and pintucked pleats, even if the film stirs nostalgia for a more refined age. She would have regarded costume re-enactments at Hanging Rock, after the fad for Regency Dress Balls, with something akin to horror. While Miranda's butterfly-buckled movie costume is the showpiece

of the National Film and Sound Archive, the frocks of the absurdly overdressed college girls are significant only as frills in the lacework of an elaborate symbolism. They represent the repressive confinement the girls endure at Appleyard, the suffocating restrictions of a culture out of joint and walled off from its environment. Arriving at the picnic grounds, the girls, 'insulated from natural contacts with earth, air and sunlight, by corsets pressing on their solar plexus, by voluminous petticoats, cotton stockings and kid boots,' are 'no more a part of their environment than figures in a photograph album.' Wistful glances back at Edwardian gentility have no basis in the novel, which points instead—particularly in the motif of the girls' discarding their clothes—to the ultimately self-destructive force of the civilizing instinct.

Lindsay's symbols are arranged not to supplant the Indigenous presence in the landscape but to come to terms with it. (The Rock represents something monstrous to Mrs Appleyard – but not to Miranda.) By gathering Aboriginal Dreaming under the sign of the Pan or mother earth myth, *Picnic* anticipates the cultural criticism that promotes the ethical and ecological value of the Aboriginal sacred. The cry of cultural reductionism raised here forgets that the term Eternal Dream Time is a translation of what the Arunta called *alcheringa* and what most Aboriginal people refer to in English simply as Dreaming. The young Joan Weigall used to visit the National Gallery with Baldwin Spencer, who, with Francis Gillen, coined the term Dream Time. As a schoolgirl, Lindsay enjoyed private tours with Sir Baldwin before public openings, listening with rapt attention—'inarticulate with a secret joy,' in her words—to the world-famous anthropologist's observations of Courbet's or Streeton's brushwork, and, no doubt, his aesthetic—rather than merely ethnographic—view of Indigenous art. Marriage to Daryl Lindsay, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, united Joan with another great supporter and legitimiser of Indigenous art. Daryl's Primitive Art Exhibition in 1943 brought Indigenous art out of the National Museum and into the National Gallery, prompting the first acquisitions of Indigenous art collections.

To be sure, the novel makes no allusion to the traditional custodians of Hanging Rock, referring only in passing to a 'black tracker' from Gippsland. The omission leaves Lindsay open to the charge of whitewashing. The rival claims of the Wurundjeri, Taungurong and Djadja Wurrung indicates a gap in the transmission of Aboriginal heritage caused by settlement, which, it might be suggested, the novel

presupposes. Certainly, Lindsay was as frustrated at the modern view of Hanging Rock as scenic spot and not sacred site as today's Anti-Picnickers, which is why, in a series of symbolic associations centred on the ancient rock, *Picnic* contrasts the premodern health of cultural forms attuned to nature's seasonal movements with the deadening, mechanistic forms of modern industrial culture.

The absence of allusion to Indigenous dispossession in the novel, or to a clear link between the dream logic that engulfs Appleyard and the Dream Time, is surely a flaw in Lindsay's design rather than a symptom of her unconscious racism. The sealed chapter itself and Lindsay's eagerness to publish it suggest as much. Despite its oddball mix of totemism and occult, chapter eighteen sheds light on the attempted fusion of Aboriginal and Western myth foreshadowed in the novel. The arrival of the girls 'into the light' and their exit through a hole in time is grafted onto the Dream Time. The eagle, crab, snake, lizard and beetle of the Dream Time usher the girls onto the numinous plane of myth, as if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing. Miranda and Marion, Rousseau suggests, are unconscious incarnations of an Australian ancestor spirit.

Sophie Cunningham is largely right to suggest that Lindsay botched these associations in the novel, resulting in 'a half-arsed idea of the Dreamtime.' The blend of western occult and Aboriginal mysticism is, at best, uneven, even if the contradiction between Miranda appearing as both non-native white swan and Indigenous totem animal (the beetle) might be resolved in the suggestion that Miranda only appears as a swan, or psychopomp, to other characters, particularly the convalescent Mike Fitzhubert. And the flaws of chapter eighteen are universally acknowledged. The metamorphosis of Miss McCraw into a crablike seer can read like an attempt to narrate the afterlife with the discarded imagery of Franz Kafka or Lewis Carroll. Lindsay wanted it published not to disclose the solution to the mystery but the cosmos behind it, which strains, however eccentrically, towards intercultural inclusion and understanding. Cunningham sees in it a dreaming more Jindyworobak than Aboriginal mystic. But it might be compared more usefully to the Aboriginal Mass in Patrick White's *Voss*, another novel written off as reactionary cultural imperialism.

While the modernist Aboriginalism of Lindsay and White is out of step with postcolonial theory, we don't get far by pushing either author back into the colonial



era of paternalism and denial. Yielding their syncretic vision to the unseen machinations of imperialist power suggests rather the limits of critique. The long view locates both authors as the bridge to current ecological and Indigenous concerns. Such 'bridging' would strike Tilley as capitulation. The Rock's alignment with Aboriginal sacred sites is, she suggests, the work of commentators channelling the zeitgeist, a cultural climate sensitive to Indigenous recognition but dim to the covert manoeuvres of the white vanishing text, with its surreptitious displacement of the indigene in the very act of valorising the landscape as ancient, other-worldly, or Gothic. Even the self-critical effort of 'anti-conquest discourse' advances the imperialism of settler culture, Tilley insists, by providing it with 'strategies of conquest through forgetting.' *Picnic* is dismissed without further ado as a white fantasy of redemption.

The Foucauldian conception of power relations in post-colonial criticism renders all texts 'complicit' in the spread of the anonymous machineries of the control society. With a suspicious eye trained on the 'disingenuous discursive mechanism' of 'anti-conquest discourse,' we can read *Picnic* for the way it 'distracts from awareness of the larger field of power relations, and forgets the extent of settler culture's subjugation of its Other.' But once we grant such insidious powers of manipulation and deceit to 'discourse,' our ability to elude its clutches, even in the approved idioms of academic speech, remains in doubt. The ingenuity of the post-colonial critic, by discovering ever anew the disingenuity of discourse, narrows the possibilities of post-colonial aesthetics. Lindsay does not urge us to memorialise the white traumas of Melbourne's suburban elite, however out of step she now is with current protocols of Indigenous recognition and representation. Rather, she invites us to ponder the poetic justice meted out to the purveyors of soulless education in the light cast by Miranda, the white native. Lindsay's white Indigenous myth does not whitewash history but Aboriginalises white consciousness. The Rock, like the desert interior in *Voss*, swallows colonisation.

## The Rock and the Rose

The narrative gaps, hermetic symbolism and autochthonous motifs in *Picnic* are of modernist heritage. Lindsay's refrain that the reader must decide for themselves was voiced just as often by Samuel Beckett. Solutions are withheld not to thwart readers—or dangle them over undecidables—but to remind them where the burden

of interpretation lies. Readers must provide their own aspirin, as Beckett put it, for headaches sustained at the cosmographer's drafting table. We are not deciding the value of this or that symbol but the type of universe that they belong to and what light it sheds on our own.

The textual authority for Neoplatonic allegory and supernaturalism is crowned in Miranda's serene revelation that everything, 'if only you could see it clearly enough, is beautiful and complete.' The notion that everything—contemplated aright—is significant apprehends the universe on the model of the artwork. The supernaturalist joins Miranda on the pinnacle of redeemed vision with the postulate of an unseen Unity, thus constellating certain bodies—a pink cloud; caramels; numerals of four; an exchange of valentines; etc—with a cosmic import locatable only with the tools of numerology and the Tarot pack. The intuition of a divine principle, 'often called Love, of which he [i.e. the supernaturalist] and all things are manifestations,' says Rousseau, leverages the cosmos on the esoteric doctrines of analogy and correspondence.

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**The intuition is that the girls have followed some otherworldly call; that Miranda, the leader, had greater knowledge, and perhaps another nature, than her fellows imagined; and that, by dancing within the ritual circle (outlined in stone), the three girls were initiated into a subtilizing process which transfigured and finally effaced their physical existence.**

To sustain the intuition, the details must remain fuzzy, like the clues pinned to the corkboard of the TV detective. Unlike the detective, however, the supernaturalist is obliged to explain everything, to exhaust meaning on a multi-planar model of the universe. Only then can the horror of the girls' disappearance appear on a higher level as knowledge of salvation. After matching the seam-lines of allegory, the reader might still wonder, with Rousseau, 'whether a sense of an artificial basis for the mystery inhibits their enjoyment of those majestically revolving thoughts which insoluble mysteries normally promote.'

Even if the supernatural laws of symbol and correspondence could be said to have

ghosted across the threshold of modernity, the redemptive vision of the enchanted world is beholden to the Gnostic haste to exit the disenchanting one. Such haste has no resonance in Lindsay's art, which, in privileging slowness, reserves an inviolate place for the rhythms of prosaic life, the patterns made by the lives of ordinary folk, like Albert Crundall, whatever Pattern might be said to encompass them. The girls' remarks from high on the Rock that the people on the plains below resemble ants, blindly carrying out the designs of some inscrutable higher power, shows none of Lindsay's appreciation for life on the plains. The prose of life loses all weight when swept up in the cosmic wheel. Its medium is memoir not gothic mystery. The little world Lindsay knew at Mulberry Hill, memorialised five years earlier in *Time Without Clocks*, nonetheless finds shelter inside the grander one set forth in the mythic symbolism of *Picnic*.

Myth is not exhausted in allegory. Nor is it incompatible with modernity. The roots of Lindsay's art in myth did not escape the eye of British philosopher Gillian Rose. In her moving 1995 memoir, *Love's Work*, Rose substitutes supernaturalism with Jewish myth. The Rock is not the Earth Mother but the stern Father of the Old Testament, the Rock of Zion. In Lindsay's central mythic opposition between stone and rose lies the less redemptive but more consuming pattern of life's work, reconciling Lindsay's prosaic vision with her symbolic art. 'The story offers us no solace of psychology or melancholy, which we yearn to find in it,' says Rose; 'It presents the pattern of a doom and a consummation.' Rose's philosophical gods commit her to a this-worldly affirmation of the tragic view, in which the hazard of life and the risks of love are one. Life's work is love's work, which the philosopher, in the face of cancer, enjoined us to take up anew in defiance of despair. Miranda is blessed not as the member of a spiritual elect but for not forgoing the risks of love.

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Academic and popular interpretation of *Picnic* meet on the ground of myth. Cultural criticism will remain unwitting of its affinities with the novel and disdainful of its popularity so long as it cleaves to the negative notion of myth as mystification. Literature and myth do more than veil the interests of the dominant class. Cultural criticism must cling to *this* hope if it wishes to contest those interests. Even the modern folklore reproduced in the white vanishing text, which the Foxtel adaptation of *Picnic* shows no sign of surpassing, concerns more than disingenuous nostalgia. The gulf separating Indigenous and settler culture, represented in the novel by

incommensurable relations to time, conditions the latter's attempt to understand its historical role as dispossessor and its prospective role as joint land steward. 'Time was what separated the colonials from the Aboriginals,' Brian Dunning observed, in a skeptoid podcast on the persistence of the modern folklore entwining *Picnic*. 'This culture clash is something that many Australians feel keenly, and it may be responsible for why so many people have sought fact in the legend, to better confront their own place in an ancient land.' If the crux of the matter, myth, can't be expunged, but only retold, then Miranda, in her wordless joy atop Hanging Rock, still has something to teach us.

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