

In Defence of the Dingo

Nerina Caltabiano

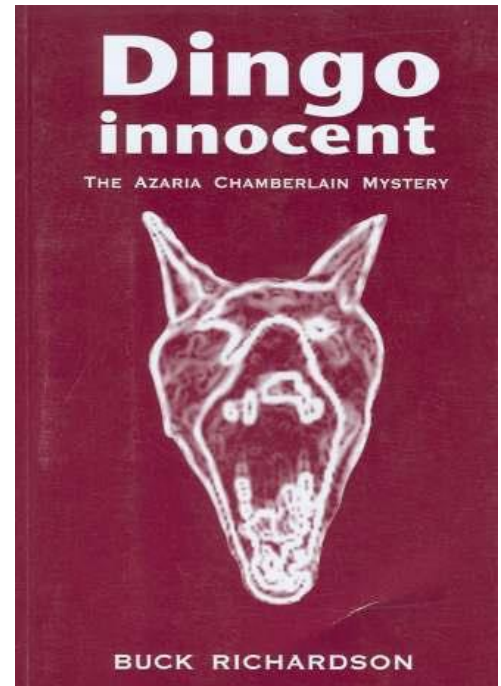
James Cook University

Buck Richardson. *Dingo innocent: The Azaria Chamberlain Mystery*.

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At dusk on the 17th August 1980, a Sunday, in the heart of the Australian continent at Ayers Rock, Lindy Chamberlain cried out “My God! My God! The dingo’s got my baby!” Lindy, wife of Michael Chamberlain, a Seventh Day Adventist minister, and mother of two sons Aidan and Regan, was referring to her third child, daughter Azaria, who was just nine weeks old. The ensuing inquests, court cases and media furore, in which culpability for the disappearance of baby Azaria was attributed to members of the Chamberlain family, or persons unknown, or the dingo, resulted in Lindy being convicted and charged with the murder of her baby, and husband Michael being given a suspended sentence as an accessory. Over seven years later, after several appeals, both were acquitted. The precise nature of Azaria’s fate has never been established and her body was never recovered.

The case has become part of modern Australian legend, and much has been written about it. There are full-length book studies such as John Bryson’s *Evil Angels* (1985), a film adaptation of the book by director Fred Schepisi, television documentaries, and even an opera, written by composer Moya Henderson and performed in 2002 at the Sydney Opera House. Google reports 14,200 hits for “Azaria Chamberlain”. Serious discussion of the case and its aftermath now recognizes its centrality to Australian mythology: in *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), Professor Peter Pierce concludes that the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain is “the most contentious of all lost child stories

in Australian history, and the one that most curiously mingles and confounds the nineteenth and the twentieth-century master narratives of such tragedy” (178).

Not unexpectedly then, today, twenty-three years later, the Azaria Chamberlain disappearance still haunts a nation. Buck Richardson’s book *Dingo Innocent: The Azaria Chamberlain Mystery* (Kuranda: LeapFrog Press, 2002) is one individual’s preoccupation with one of Australia’s unsolved outback disappearances. What makes this mystery remarkable and provides a difficulty for any hypotheses investigated is that the body of the infant was never found. Richardson’s obsessive paper chase is his attempt at putting closure on this mystery. His personal sifting through the quagmire of public domain key source materials from the inquests, trials, court appeal, royal commission and books are organized for the reader so that in his final chapters we should come to the same realization that the author does. Whether his outcome is convincing is something readers will have to judge for themselves.

“Aidan asked Lindy [at the barbecue on the night of Azaria’s disappearance] whether the dingo could take the baby. Lindy said of course not, “Mummy wouldn’t let him. She’s safe with us. They wouldn’t come close or go in our tent” (3). In some ways these words turned out to be prophetic utterances. It is the sequence of events that followed that constitutes the subject matter of this book.

The contents of the book are organized in seven chapters: (1) “History of the tragedy at Ayers Rock”. (2) “High principles”, (3) “Azaria, taken by a dingo or murdered by Lindy?”, (4) “The selling of murder”, (5) “Why the High Court of Australia failed”, (6) “Siblings”, and (7) “Guardian angels”. Chapter 3, by far the longest chapter in the book, looks at the evidence presented in the trials which focused on Lindy’s role. Two-thirds of this material focuses on the dingo itself. This is understandable given those famous words “A dingo’s got my baby” that were uttered by Lindy on that fateful evening of the 17th August, 1980, and that continue to reverberate in the nation’s mind.

From the start Richardson primes the reader for his version of events that are to come in Chapter 6. This subtext is carefully woven into the story as told from the paper trail. Chapter 1 provides the reader with an overview of the Chamberlain story starting with the birth of Azaria, the baby girl that the parents had expected some four years earlier. The elation surrounding Azaria’s birth would have been clear to Reagan from the start. At the delivery

Michael is reported as having said, “Do you hear that Reagan? You’ve got a baby sister...”

(1). The reader is told that Reagan’s gender was a disappointment for the parents. The child must have sensed this rejection. Perhaps Reagan is being set up as the scapegoat – it will be natural that the child will want to do away with the object that wants to compete with him for love and affection. This love-hate relationship is further complicated by Lindy’s childrearing game. Reagan is charged with the care of Azaria as Aidan before him had been charged with Reagan’s care.

There are other scenarios throughout the text that point us in the same direction. Reagan causes the shopping trolley accident where Azaria hits her head on the floor. The sibling rivalry present between Aidan and Reagan is discussed as being a natural developmental milestone rather than something particularly sinister or peculiar to this family. Even though the source is somewhat dated this is cleverly interpreted with the aid of an authoritative source on child psychiatry.

From a religious developmental perspective, the Chamberlains clearly saw their god as their protector, support and strength through this horrific ordeal. In the final chapter entitled “Guardian angels” Richardson provides the reader with a glimpse of this family’s faith. Lindy pleads with God for Reagan not to be emotionally hurt when he suffers an eye accident. “She [Lindy] believed and believes that God knows all. God has a plan. ... He intervenes in personal affairs and responds to personal prayers.God would help... ‘if we are all good’ and ‘if I am true’” (185). Michael too has strong beliefs. “We must remember that God’s plan can be fulfilled through many detours...His plans are more confusing than we will ever fathom, but they still get done. He knows the end from the beginning and I don’t doubt that. He is all-knowing” (185). Yet when the deed had been done by animal, person or person’s unknown, the parents, and Lindy in particular, demonstrate the greatest love possible by protecting their children and enduring personal hardship. If this was God’s plan who are they to question this and the way events unfold.

Richardson has done his work well in his selection of material to support his perspective. Witness reports, expert testimonies, legal personnel and their questions that Richardson points out often didn’t quite go far enough, all attest to the fact that despite all of the inquiry and speculation the disappearance of Azaria continues to be inexplicable. Richardson’s work is compelling reading for those who remain curious and want to speculate on yet another theory of the Azaria Chamberlain mystery.

