

DONALD BARRETT

PICNICKING WITH E.M. FORSTER, JOAN LINDSAY et. al.

When Joan Lindsay died on 23 December 1984, the newspapers energetically revived speculation on the mystery aspects of her famous novel:

“Right up to her death Lady Lindsay refused to answer the question which fascinated readers: was it fact or fiction”.¹

“Lady Joan Lindsay said of her book: ‘I can’t tell you whether the story is fact or fiction. But a lot of very strange things have happened in the area of Hanging Rock, things that have no logical explanation.’”²

Phillip Adams wrote a feature article, “Joan Hasn’t Died — Just Wandered Off in Time”.³ It has some charming personal reminiscences, and some of the points he raises are explored below.

Most intriguing of all was the revelation of a “final” chapter. Joan Lindsay’s former agent, John Taylor, stated she had passed to him in 1972 the manuscript of chapter 18, together with a documented copyright, on the understanding that it was not to be released during her lifetime. He proposed to release it on a cassette tape, read by a leading actress. After this would come a commentary by “the world’s leading expert on *Picnic*”, Ms Yvonne Rousseau.⁴

Ms Rousseau herself confirmed all this and commented in fairly general terms on the manuscript, concluding,

“In some ways Lady Lindsay outsluthed me, because the ending is strange and surprising — a combination of three of my theories yet not any of them. *Picnic* fans the world over will not be disappointed”.⁵

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) was also reported as having a copy of chapter 18 and to be taking legal advice about ownership and publication rights.⁶ Later, however, the Trust acknowledged that all rights were vested in Mr Taylor.⁷ Yvonne Rousseau has written a clever work of imagination, underpinned with a considerable knowledge of literature and philosophy. It is not primarily a work of scholarship. It presents several lengthy hypotheses on what happened at Hanging Rock. Each is well argued — and each hypothesis contradicts the others:

- (i) The girls have passed into another dimension of time and space (p. 39-56). Phillip Adams put forward a similar theory.⁸ He asked Joan Lindsay if he was right, and she said he was.⁹ Rousseau with her philosopher’s precision is critical of Adams’s version on points of detail and definition.

- (ii) The girls have shed their human qualities, passed into a celestial domain and become figures in a supernatural, cosmic dance pattern (p. 79-94).
- (iii) A human magician is performing spells at the Rock — it is the mathematics mistress Greta McCraw! — and she and the three lost girls are each transformed into a natural object or creature. Miss McCraw becomes a flat rock, the one a bloodhound stood on for ten minutes, growling and bristling; Irma, a wallaby; Miranda, a swan; and Marion, a dove (p. 94-6).
- (iv) A reciprocal pattern is worked through: after the picnickers intrude on the environment, a counter-assault of forces from the Rock destroys them and, ultimately, the College from which they came (p. 99-133).
- (v) An unidentified flying object (hence the drumming sounds and the rosy light) causes the girls to become lighter, gyrate in dance and go into a trance-like state. It then carries them off. Irma becomes discontented and is returned to the Rock. Rousseau anticipates that this explanation will satisfy no one. (p. 57-8).
- (vi) A “straight” detective version employs only human agents; there is no supernatural element. Michael and Albert abduct the girls and abuse them. Irma alone escapes; the others are murdered (p. 135-72).

Rousseau writes:

“With my multiple solutions, I may even hope to have convinced the unbelieving that solutions are unimportant — but not in life itself; only in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (where the author’s own ideas about life have determined the data)”. (p. 173) Rousseau in a very learned way has done for adults what Bantam Books has done for children in the twenty or so titles in its *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. In saying this I am being in no way derogatory.

It is useful at this point, however, to defer consideration of solutions and code-cracking and consider the various influences that may have shaped *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Joan Lindsay was not only a writer but a professional painter. In the National Gallery of Victoria are two nineteenth century paintings which have possible links with the novel.

The first is Frederick McCubbin’s *The Lost Child* (1886), based on the true story of Clara Crosby, a young girl who survived after being lost in the Victorian bush for three weeks in 1885. The painting is a typical example of the way McCubbin introduced human figures into his early landscapes. Joan Lindsay in her commentary on the painting wrote:

“In *The Lost Child*, the human element is strangely at one with the rustling silence of the bush”.¹⁰

That sentence virtually encapsulates the plot of the novel to come.

When we come to William Ford's *Picnic Party at Hanging Rock* (1875), there can be little doubt. A group of fashionably dressed adults, both male and female, and children are perfectly at ease in the lush bushland that surrounds the rock. The scene is idyllic to a fault. The painting was acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1950. Phillip Adams told me the painting hung in the office of the Director, Joan Lindsay's husband Daryl.¹¹ He said also that Joan had acknowledged its influence to him.

She herself wrote to me:

"I had my first encounter with Hanging Rock aged about six — it left such a powerful impression that I didn't attempt to write about it for about fifty years!"¹²

That puts the genesis of the novel in the early fifties, that is just after the acquisition of the painting.

Picnic can also be linked with C.A.E. Moberly and E.F. Jourdain, *An Adventure* (London: Macmillan, 1911; 5th edn, London: Faber, 1950). Miss Moberly and Miss Jourdain were Principal and Vice-Principal respectively of St. Hugh's Hall, Oxford. In 1901 they went to visit the Petit Trianon at Versailles. They saw in the garden persons and features that then appeared to be real but were afterwards found to have been out of keeping with the circumstances of 1901. Discussing the matter a week later, they concluded the place was haunted. Each wrote a brief independent account. After later visits and research, they decided they had been transported from the twentieth century and actually witnessed scenes at the court of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. In an Appendix Miss Jourdain claimed she had another transient feeling of "being taken up into another condition of things" during a return visit on 12 September 1908.

Phillip Adams tells me he wrote a laudatory piece on the book,¹³ after which Joan Lindsay *spontaneously* and delightedly told him it was one of the things that had inspired her to write *Picnic*. In this matter it seems safe to take her at her word. The essence of Moberly and Jourdain's *Adventure* is their translation into another dimension of time and space. If Rousseau and Adams are right in suggesting this also happened to the girls at Hanging Rock (and they probably are), then Joan Lindsay's remarks about *An Adventure* shows *why* they are right.¹⁴

The most obvious literary influence on *Picnic*, however, is E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Here some background may be useful. When I first dealt with the problem of meaning in *Picnic*, I argued that the novel was pervaded, indeed dominated by Pan motifs.¹⁵ These included a primitive, isolated, mountainous, "active" environment,

which had to be reached by an ascent, and which was able both to attract and to repel, to destroy and preserve; an intrusion into this environment; a presence that could be seen or heard, or neither seen nor heard; sleeping, dreaming, fainting and collapsing; passion, rage and madness; sexual tension; fear and anxiety; the prominence of noonday; tension between order and disorder, rationality and instinct.

In that paper I referred also to a study of Joan Kirkby, which mentions "interesting analogues" between *Picnic* and *Passage*.¹⁶

In fact, the similarities of theme are quite remarkable. Forster's Marabar Hills, a focal point of the story, are isolated, animate and even personified: towards sunset they drew nearer to the town of Chandrapore;¹⁷ boulders and small stones declared themselves alive or almost alive (p. 161); they struck their gong (a reference to the echo that plagued Adela and Mrs Moore) (p. 212); their fists and fingers enclosed the night sky (p. 249);¹⁸ they drove Aziz to love his native India (p. 266) and to believe his friend Cyril Fielding would marry his accuser Adela (p. 277); the caves were dark (p. 138); some had never been unsealed (p. 139); the hills shifted as the train went past; they were gods to whom the earth was a ghost (p. 149); for all their beauty, "they had altered a good many lives and wrecked several careers" (p. 238).

The Hills were wholly primitive, their caves sealed from time immemorial (p. 139); the corridor around the Kawa Dol (the highest rock) had never changed (p. 153); the earth must have looked like this before the creation of human beings and perhaps even of birds (p. 158); the undying worm that lives in the first of the caves had preceded time and space (p. 212).

The caves and rocking-stone on top had to be reached by an ascent (p. 162, 164). The Hills had an uncanny power to attract, Adela being particularly susceptible (p. 66, 149, 230); Mrs Moore, on the other hand, found the first cave she entered repulsive and went no further (p. 153). Indeed, the Hills could be charming or repulsive depending on whether they were far or near (p. 171).

They were also pervaded by a strange presence, whose commonest manifestation was a dull echo (p. 158-9, 160, 200, 205, 212-3, 216, 272). Mrs Moore and Adela were particularly affected even after leaving the Hills, to the extent that any respite was occasion for comment (p. 207, 210, 239). Such auditory sensations, of course, are not uncommon in schizophrenia. At other times the presence took the form of a shadow (p. 199) and "a spiritual silence which invaded more senses than the ear" (p. 152).

Again, the people who went on the expedition to the Marabar Hills were affected by illusion: Adela saw a "snake", which turned out to be

the stump of a toddy-palm (p. 152); she imagined she heard Mrs Moore say Aziz was innocent (p. 208-9). Mrs Moore regularly talked about the Marabar in her sleep (p. 227). When Hamidullah heard Adela say she was not sure whether Aziz was guilty, he wondered if he was mad or dreaming (p. 243). Mrs Moore was seized by a terrifying vision of the universe (p. 161); as she sailed from Bombay, she thought the coconut palms waved to her and mocked her (p. 214). Adela in court had a vision of the caves (p. 230), and vision came to her more easily than speech (p. 231). She wondered if the "assault" had been merely an hallucination (p. 239-40). During her time of recovery in the McBrydes' bungalow, she was abnormally inert. (The parallel with Irma Leopold's convalescence in *Picnic* is striking.)

Still more frightening, the picnic party and those whose lives they touched were a prey to various psychic disturbances. The Collector Turton was "insane with rage" at a looting scene (p. 175); Adela during her recovery had moments of hysteria (p. 199); she told Fielding she was neurotic (p. 209). In court he realised she was close to a nervous breakdown (p. 231). Aziz was seized with a pathological suspicion (p. 276-7). After the trial was aborted, the inhabitants of Chandrapore fell into a mad fury (p. 232, 234, 237), and even Fielding lost his usual sane view of human relationships (p. 249).

Aziz was morbidly anxious about the expedition arrangements. The reason? "Trouble after trouble encountered him, because he had challenged the spirit of the Indian earth which tries to keep men in compartments" (p. 141). He was depressed by the misunderstanding between himself and Fielding — "a dull pain of body and mind" (p. 275). Adela constantly wondered and worried about sex and love and marriage (p. 163-4). While recovering, she was weighed down by grief and depression (p. 200). Mrs Moore, while she was in the first cave and after she had left it, experienced feelings of utter terror and panic (p. 158, 161).

Finally, while the group joined the train before daybreak, the central part of the expedition took place in mid to late morning heat, which grew ever worse (p. 161) and confused people's perceptions of reality (p. 153).

All of these elements find their way into *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. All of them are associated with the mythology of Pan, a figure which had long fascinated Forster. Leonard Woolf calls the short stories "Pan-ridden".¹⁹ David Garnett points out that Pan and his cohorts of satyrs and dryads sometimes actually appear in the short stories and are "always waiting in the wings".²⁰ He suggests that Pan would have been included just as overtly in *Passage* but for the restraining influence of Forster's Bloomsbury friends. Forster instead has used the Marabar

Hills as a symbol for Pan, and the novel takes on a far greater subtlety as a result. The equivalent symbol in *Picnic* is the Rock.²¹

There is more, of course, to *A Passage to India* than Pan motifs, for example symbols such as the snake, the wasp and the undying worm, not to mention the vast panorama of India's religions. But I believe it probable that Joan Lindsay consciously borrowed the elements detailed above.²²

Should we criticise this as blatant plagiarism? Phillip Adama called it "unconscious influence. It happens all the time. Whatever time might be".²³ Certainly the borrowing appears to be conscious and unacknowledged. But perhaps it would be fairer to say Joan Lindsay has simply imitated a reputable model. That form of literary endeavour has a long and honourable history from the time of Isocrates, who regarded it as an important element in the teaching of rhetoric.²⁴ Quintilian declared Demosthenes the perfect model for student orators,²⁵ while today students of Latin prose composition are regularly enjoined to imitate the language and style of Cicero.

While one now finds few advocates for the practice outside the classroom, it has always gone on and been little condemned: Shakespeare appropriated all his plots; Chaucer was renowned throughout Europe as "the great translator". Some saw it as an advantage to admit a debt even where there seems to have been none: Cervantes published *Don Quixote* as from the Arabian of Cid Hamet Ben Engeli; Horace Walpole claimed his *Castle of Otranto* was translated from the Italian.²⁶

Nor, of course, is the imitation of reputable models confined to literature: the poses of the three figures in Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* were taken from a group of river gods and a nymph in Raphael's *Judgment of Paris*, and Jean Renoir clearly borrowed more than the title for his 1959 film of the same name. Manet's *Olympia* is an imitation of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*; the figures in his *The Old Musician* are owed to Velasquez, to Watteau, to a classical marble statue and to a lithograph by Nanteuil (who in turn has imitated Velasquez's *Drinkers*). Even *Advance Australia Fair* seems to have originated in a set of anonymous eighteenth century German folk songs.²⁷ In short, artistic creation is often anything but a virgin birth, unaided by outside influences. In Goethe's words, "People are always talking about originality, but what do they mean? As soon as we are born, the world begins to work on us, and this goes on to the end".²⁸

The endearing and sometimes exasperating thing about Joan Lindsay was that, instead of acknowledging her debt, she always chose to tease those who inquired about the origin and meaning of her novel. I asked her in a letter whether she had been influenced by the Ford

painting; she left that question unanswered; I asked her about Pan themes; her reply was equivocal; Peter Weir declared that he could never persuade her to talk about the inner meaning of the novel.

She teases her readers unmercifully:

“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”.²⁹

The list of characters concludes with the words “And many others who do not appear in this book”! Chapter 17 purports to be an “extract from a Melbourne newspaper, dated February 14th, 1913”, giving an update on the various characters. Many a public librarian has cursed that reference. The fact that the story is entirely fictional was given away by the usual disclaimer at the end of the film.

Perhaps one could apply to Joan Lindsay the words used of Forster by Katherine Mansfield:

“E.M. Forster never gets any further than warming the teapot. He’s a rare fine hand at that. Feel this teapot. Is it not beautifully warm? Yes, but there ain’t going to be no tea”.³⁰

ADDENDUM

The final chapter of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* appeared on 14 February (St Valentine’s Day), 1987, as *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, with an introduction by John Taylor and a commentary by Yvonne Rousseau. The cover of the booklet and the sealed envelope in which it is supplied depict a reproduction of McCubbin’s *The Lost Child*.

Miranda, Marion and Miss McCraw follow a small brown snake through a hole into a cave bathed in light. The hole closes over before Irma can follow. The normal passage of time is suspended. This “solution” embodies Yvonne Rousseau’s theories i, ii and possibly iv. The snake, of course, crops up frequently in *A Passage to India*.

John Taylor claims there is no evidence Joan Lindsay read *A Passage to India* or *An Adventure*, which he wrongly calls *The Ghosts of Versailles* (p. 3) — a question on which we have corresponded. I have cited the evidence above.

I agree with Yvonne Rousseau that “the film and the published novel of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are complete in their present form” (p. 53). I disagree with her view that chapter 18 “adds to the Hanging Rock mystique” (p. 54). While, to be fair, it was probably never revised, it comes as something of an anticlimax.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹*The Courier-Mail*, 24 December 1984.
- ²*The Weekend Australian*, 2-3 February 1985.
- ³*ibid.*, 5-6 January 1985.
- ⁴*The Australian*, 30 January 1985.
- ⁵*ibid.*, 31 January 1985.
- ⁶*The Weekend Australian*, 2-3 February 1985.
- ⁷Confirmed in letters to me from Mr Taylor (20 September 1985) and the Trust Acting Administrator (17 October 1985).
- ⁸*The Age*, 1 November 1975, reprinted as "Into Another Dimension", *The Unspeakable Adams* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1977), p. 63-8.
- ⁹*The Weekend Australian*, 5-6 January 1985.
- ¹⁰"Australian Art", in Ursula Hoff (ed.), *Masterpieces of the National Gallery of Victoria* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1949), p. 190.
- ¹¹Letter, 15 August 1984.
- ¹²Letter, 29 December 1981.
- ¹³Letter, 15 August 1984.
- ¹⁴An *Adventure* is discussed objectively and demolished convincingly in Lucille Iremonger, *The Ghosts of Versailles* (London: Faber, 1957). Phillip Adams mistakenly calls the books *The Ghosts of Versailles* and *The Ghosts of Versailles Revisited* respectively in *The Weekend Australian*, 5-6 January 1985.
- ¹⁵*Southerly* XLII, 3 (1982), 299-308. Joan Lindsay's illuminating comments are cited on p. 308.
- ¹⁶"Old Order, New Lands: The Earth Spirit in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*", *Australian Literary Studies* VIII, 3 (1978), 255-68.
- ¹⁷E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 65, 197. Other page numbers will be included in the text.
- ¹⁸Wilfred Stone, *The Cave and the Mountain: A Study of E.M. Forster* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 131, regards a similar image of a forest of chestnuts in *The Story of a Panic* as a perfect symbol of feminine enslavement.
- ¹⁹Cited in J.B. Beer, *The Achievement of E.M. Forster* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 173.
- ²⁰"Forster and Bloomsbury", in Oliver Stallybrass (ed.), *Aspects of E.M. Forster* (London: Arnold, 1969), p. 33.
- ²¹See D.S. Barrett, op. cit. (n. 15 supra), 307.
- ²²There is even, in the case of Mrs Moore's quest for oneness with the universe (p. 212), a suggestion that the "normal" dimensions of time and space have been obliterated, but it is probably prudent to wait for the actual publication of the last chapter of *Picnic* before making too much of that. In the meantime, however, there is an interesting discussion of the topic in Frederick C. Crews, *E.M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 157-58.
- ²³*The Weekend Australian*, 5-6 January 1985.
- ²⁴*Against the Sophists*, 18.
- ²⁵*Institutio Oratoria*, 10.1.66.
- ²⁶Title page, 1764 edition.
- ²⁷Warren Bebbington, "So Who Did Write Our National Anthem?", *The Courier-Mail*, 26 January 1985.
- ²⁸Cited in J.P. Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 12 May 1825.
- ²⁹Penguin edition, 1970, p. 6.
- ³⁰*Journal*, May 1917.