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– ARTICLE –

'A TASTE OF HELL':
FEAR OF FIRE IN THE AUSTRALIAN SETTLER IMAGINARY

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ABSTRACT

Australian settler fiction and poetry stage shifting notions of temporality in relation to bushfires. The fire was an important plot device in settler writing, initially adding a touch of local colour for readers back home in England through stories of melodramatic rescue. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, understandings of fire had begun to change, as settlers began to learn that fires were not simply one-off catastrophes, but rather they were recurring phenomena. Underpinning my arguments with theories of affect, in particular Brian Massumi's work on 'fear of future fire' and the philosopher Alexander Bain's work on trauma, I argue that as settlers became increasingly conscious of the cyclicality of bushfires, their understandings of time and its relation to landscape altered. Realist writing responded to this deepening knowledge of the Australian environment, and instead of emphasizing the fleeting drama of a fire, fiction began to focus on its seasonal return. These stories and poems highlight the extreme vigilance that accompanies heightened knowledge and memories of the land. We see characters waiting for fires to arrive in scenes that are often agonizing in their slow pace, leaving them caught, as Barbara Eckstein expresses it, 'between bushfire and approaching' (Eckstein 2014, 256). Yet we also see bushfires, both actual and anticipated, accumulate memories of fires that have come before, and the devastation they have caused.

Memory and nostalgia play important and complicated roles in attempts to mediate and manage the Australian landscape, exposing the fiction of a land that could be tamed or pastoralized to become just like the home settlers had left behind. Drawing on the fire historian Tom Griffiths' notion of the amnesia that enables survivors of bushfires to return to the site of the blaze and to build anew, I examine representations of characters who doggedly rebuild their old lives. In particular, I consider the fraught nature of 'willed amnesia' or the denial of the reality that fire will return, while also considering connections between memory and place.

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Introduction

While they farmed the land and built houses in the countryside, many nineteenth-century European settlers experienced a sense of alienation from Australia's arid landscape, with its vastness and its curious flora and fauna. The sudden and brutal destruction caused by a bushfire often compounded this feeling of displacement, with a serious burn leaving colonists ill at ease with their new surroundings. The fire became an important plot device in Australian settler fiction and poetry, initially adding a touch of local colour for readers – particularly those back home in England – through stories of melodramatic rescue and daring heroism. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, understandings of the environment had begun to change, as settlers began to learn that fire was seasonal and that a major burn was not simply a one-off catastrophe. The gradual understanding that fires were recurring phenomena was tied to a shift in understandings of time and the seasons. Colonists attempted to impose a European calendar upon Australia, but the four seasons model did not translate to their parched and unpredictable new surroundings. Indigenous Australians had, and maintain to this day, a much clearer sense of regional diversity, with different peoples identifying different seasons according to their location and, in some places, observing six distinct periods of the year. Settlers were, as their descendants continue to be, slow to learn from the land's traditional custodians, and many were deeply invested in the notion that European values – including those surrounding land management and the measurement of time – could be transposed to the Antipodes, believing themselves in the process to be making order out of a landscape that seemed both hostile and unruly.

Seeking to create a home that appeared as European as possible, and importing northern hemisphere farming techniques pretty much wholesale, settlers misread and mismanaged the land, not always understanding that its otherness meant that it might require different treatment rather than 'taming' or 'mastery'. The landscape that settlers attempted to create was shaped by nostalgia, even while its vast scrublands and twisting gums resisted efforts to impose a European model of the pastoral. The pains they took to shape an environment that withstood attempts to recreate the north in the south impacted upon many migrants' ability to settle, and for many the aesthetics of the European landscape continued to offer a yardstick against which to measure the 'unruly' Australian flora. Rather than embracing the otherness of this new world, the threat – and anticipated threat – of the bushfire played a significant role in this

unsettled form of settlement, as colonists slowly learned that their imported understandings of fire needed to be reconfigured.[2]

Fire was perceived to be an enemy in need of eradication, and, as Benjamin Wilkie (2015, np) describes it,

> To the nineteenth-century Europeans, fire was a threat. It could destroy their land, their livestock, their homes, and it could take their lives. As the European settlement of Australia and its peoples went on – often into areas cleared already, it seems, by bushfire – the Indigenous fire and land management regimes ceased to operate. Europeans used the land differently. The controlled burning stopped, and dense, ground level vegetation returned where it had not been in 1788. With changes to flora came changes to fauna, and many animal populations had declined or disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century. Along with the cessation of fire regimes – allowing scrubby, low-lying bush and grassland to establish itself where it had not been before – fuel loads increased, and, when weather conditions were right, so did the intensity and frequency of bushfires.

What Wilkie captures here is the rapidity with which fire regimes altered by settlers interfered with Australia's ecology, along with the bitter irony that these efforts to Europeanize the continent in fact compounded its difference. The clearance of trees, for example, was driven by a European agricultural model that required pasture for grazing, but clearing the land made it much more prone to fire.[3] Nostalgia for the British countryside, and the actions that it generated, became the enemy, as attempts to create an affective (and commercial) relationship with the land made it more susceptible to burning and therefore *less* familiar and increasingly threatening. As Fiannuala Morgan (2021) notes, in the years following 1851's 'Black Thursday' the bushfire became a popular narrative trope in realist writing, which sought to represent some of the dramas specifically associated with migration to Australia.[4] Writing about fires was perhaps one way for the settler community to attempt to tame them, managing the flames through narrative when they proved to be too overwhelmingly destructive to allow control in real life.

The stories settlers told about fires registered a growing awareness that bushfires were inevitable seasonal phenomena. This consciousness of their cyclical nature, along with a deepening knowledge of the Australian environment, is reflected in a growing narrative sensitivity to the rhythms of the year. Some of the earliest fire stories, melodramas of the 1850s and 1860s, tended to show

fires igniting almost spontaneously, often providing outlets for the otherwise concealed passions of their protagonists.[5] However, by the end of the century, creative accounts of fire spurned this type of short-lived drama in favour of more protracted representations of both the blaze itself and the build-up to its arrival. The bushfire is a reminder of human vulnerability, and while the critic Trish Ferguson highlights the Victorians' attempts to 'control and systematize time' (2013, 1), a natural catastrophe of this kind undermined these endeavours and challenged the idea that the Bush could be conquered.[6]

Those settlers who were caught up in fires experienced a very different version of time from that carefully measured out in Greenwich, a temporality which could be both agonizingly protracted and lightning swift. A newspaper account of 'Black Thursday' by the prolific novelist and columnist William Howitt, which appeared in the *Illustrated Family Paper* (published by Cassell's in London), draws attention to the duality of time as reported by fire survivors. Citing a source named only as 'A Writer from Mount Macedon,' Howitt provides his readers with a first-hand account of the devastation, which his source believes to have been caused by a squatter setting fire to dry grass to burn it off before spring: [7]

> I write in the midst of desolation. Thursday morning was ushered in with a fierce hot wind, which, as the day advanced, grew stronger and stronger. For *three weeks* bush-fires had been raging to the northward and westward of the Bush Inn. About noon the whole of Mount Macedon and the ranges were one sheet of flame careering at the speed of a race-horse; carrying all before it as clean as a chimney newly swept. The destruction in the vicinity of the Bush Inn is truly appalling. (1854, 67; italics in the original)

Howitt, who lived in Australia from 1852 until 1854, reproduces a number of similar reflections on the events and drama of the day.[8] Many of the authors cited by Howitt reveal, like the writer from Mount Macedon, an attentiveness to official time. Yet what is striking about each account is how each witness, having carefully documented the hour, shows the fire taking over and rupturing conventional experiences of time. For the Mount Macedon writer, the flames rapidly become overwhelming and time yields to the trajectory of the blaze with an apocalyptic sense of collapse, as fearful anticipation gives way to devastation. Howitt quotes from another report, appearing in the *Portland Guardian* on the day of the fire, which shows a similar interest in accurately recording the time:

> Yesterday forenoon was a period of extraordinary heat, and we are sorry to say, of calamity also. The heat, from 11 o'clock, a.m., until after noon, was most oppressive, a hot wind blowing from the N.N. West in the most furious manner. At this time the thermometer stood for an hour by one glass at 122°, while by others it reached 116° in the sun. The dust in the street was most suffocating, penetrating the smallest crevices, and filling the houses … About 12 o'clock a bush-fire in the vicinity began to rage with the utmost fury. It sprung up near the race-course, and through the violence of the hot wind threatened to consume the booths, and to envelop the persons who had assembled there, in the flames, before time could be afforded them to escape. (1854, 67)

On one level this attention to chronology is important as a means of establishing the writer's credentials and ability to present events as they occurred. However, on an emotional level, documenting the 'before' and 'after' of the fire becomes a means of articulating, as closely as possible, when lives were both taken and changed.[9]

Recording the time provides a clear indication of when disaster struck and when anticipation of the fire – and hope of avoiding it – transformed into a memory rather than a state of mind. The report captures how, for those who become the fire's victims, there is no longer any time. It cannot be 'afforded' them to escape, with the fire's deadly force placing them beyond time. For those who are more fortunate, marking the time at which the danger passed is also a significant act, defining the progression from danger to safety, from potential victims to fortunate survivors. Later in the article we learn of a luckier group of people for whom, 'the wind moderated about two o'clock, and the apprehension passed away' (1854, 67), with their fears both literally and figuratively carried away by the breeze, on this occasion at least. Howitt's piece shows how these experiences and affective engagements with time shift, according to whether one is awaiting, experiencing, or beyond danger, play a central role in bushfire fiction and poetry, as a way of generating excitement within the reader but also as a means of signalling how extreme emotions can override established systems of time measurement.

The reporter from the *Portland Guardian* continues, through an attentive examination of the landscape, to consider how fire can burn through hundreds of years' worth of growth, blazing through ancient forests and displacing native animals:

> The most striking features of the Cape Otway country are, the immense size and crowdedness of the timber trees, and the density and luxuriant growth of the fern scrub. This scrub, in ordinary circumstances, burns slowly, so that a fire may continue for many weeks in some parts of the timber without extending very far from the spot where it originated. Such a fire was, in fact, known to exist for a month past in the ranges, but no alarm was felt in consequence. The hot wind of Thursday, however, playing upon the kindled nucleus, caused the fire to spread with such fury, that the dense scrub was swept away like stubble, and the flames were carried along in the tops of the trees, leaving the massive trunks ignited wherever any decayed hollow or dead branch gave the fire a resting-place. (1854, 67)

This passage is fascinating, as it shows that settlers were comfortable living alongside a fire 'in the ranges'. However, the burnscape that is left behind here is at odds with the forest's 'magnificence', noted earlier in the article. The hot wind has become an accelerant in more ways than one – hastening the fire's progress through the wooded area, while also speeding its destruction.

As settlers deepened their understandings of fire seasons and regimes, so representations of fires began to emphasize the anxiety generated by days of extreme heat. In narrative terms, this state generates an endless and potentially unwieldy state of suspense that only abates when catastrophe strikes, but which returns time and time again. Writers like Louisa Atkinson, J.S. Borlase, and Anthony Trollope highlighted the acute state of vigilance that accompanies heightened knowledge of Australian fire ecology, temporality, and memories of the land. They also captured the excruciating agony of characters waiting for fires to arrive, in scenes that are often painfully slow in pace.

This period of waiting for a fire to arrive leaves the reader caught, as Barbara Eckstein puts it, 'between bushfire and approaching' (2014, 256). The minutes on the clock continue to tick, keeping isochronous time, yet for those awaiting the arrival of a fire, time unfolds very differently. Writing of today's ecological crisis, Dipesh Chakrabarty expresses 'a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility' (2009, 197). While Chakrabarty is thinking broadly about the prospect of human extinction, his formulation of disrupted chronology is useful for thinking about the overwhelming-ness of the present for those who await a fire's arrival.

Louisa Atkinson's novella *Tressa's Resolve* (1872, published posthumously) is a

complicated narrative of settler life, which originally appeared in serial form. The story offers a critique of the transposition of European farming techniques to Australia, depicting Tyrell Love, a would-be gentleman farmer, whose sheep station fails through his lack of environmental knowledge. As a distinguished botanist, natural history writer and illustrator in her own right, and the wife of the prominent botanist James Snowden Calvert, Atkinson had a clear understanding of Australia's Indigenous flora and the many challenges its ecology posed to migrant farmers.[10] Running parallel to her story of Tyrell's thwarted attempt to harness the land is another plot involving the hapless and selfish Andrew Murray, who brings his delicate young English bride, Adeline, to his parched homestead, where his livestock are found to be dying of thirst. While Adeline's plot-line is quite perfunctory, appearing towards the story's end, Atkinson draws parallels between the young woman and her environment, afflicting her with a deathly fever which mirrors the sweltering heat of the sun and the aridity of the land. There is an inevitability to the bushfire that ignites at the height of Adeline's 'fatigue and alarm' ([1872] 2004, 89).

The fire has been deliberately set by Indigenous Australians, although Atkinson's narrator recounts this fact without pausing to consider why 'the blacks had fired the grass to the windward' (88), lingering instead over the hostility of the landscape and the difficulty of escape on horseback.[11] The fire scene takes place over a few paragraphs, which superbly capture its swift and deadly progress. The writing is fast-paced, emphasizing the 'suffocating smoke' and 'advancing destruction' (88), while at the same time reinforcing the all-consuming sense of the present that accompanies an adrenaline-charged escape. Atkinson astutely notes the brevity of this temporal disconnect, while at the same time registering that it is charged with incidents whose weight and potential to endanger seem at odds with their fleeting nature. The narrator recounts,

> By that time the flames were devouring the trees and driftwood on the opposite shore; blinding them with smoke, and casting a painful heat; but the conflagration was soon over—a charred black waste stretched out for miles, with here and there a tiny column of black smoke rising on it; but the danger was passed. (89)

The rapidity of the fire's passage here seems incongruous when set against the scale of its destruction, and the swiftness with which the drama subsides. The sickly Adeline dies almost as soon as the fire has passed, as though her life has become entangled with its force, moving from the intensity of a burning fever to extinguishment and waste in which time no longer signifies. The charred landscape seems to stretch forth like eternity, although Atkinson declines to

linger over this vision, shifting her melodrama instead to Andrew Murray's sudden insanity when faced with his wife's death, and bringing the story to a sudden and bleak conclusion shortly thereafter.

Atkinson's fire scene is one of many incidents in a novella steeped in sensationalism and drama. The fire is both expected and unexpected: inevitable because of the weather and the season, yet startling to the characters who are unprepared for the challenges posed by the outback. As settler literature established itself and the bushfire was incorporated as a narrative convention, readerly engagements with fire became increasingly knowing, with authors drawing upon their sense of horrified anticipation. Fire was an unavoidable reality of Australian life, and, as such, its representation in literary accounts became more drawn out. Thus, a novella like Anthony Trollope's *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* (1874) devotes chapter after chapter to the possibility that a fire could ignite at any time, to the degree that it is almost a relief for the reader when an arsonist takes matters into his own hands and sets alight Harry's tinder-dry farm.

In Trollope's tale of squatter life, the waiting is twofold, as both characters and readers accept the certainty of a fire. Trollope stretches the reader's nerves with frequent allusions to Harry's fear of fire and his knowledge that he will be ruined should his sheep station burn. Harry comments to his wife, near the beginning of the story, 'It's a ticklish thing to think that a spark of fire any where about the place might ruin me, and to know at the same time that every man about the run and every swagsman that passes along have matches in their pocket' ([1874] n.d., 5). The narrator compounds this feeling of uneasy anticipation with foreshadowings of unwelcome Christmas fires which 'light themselves' (1) and incidents showing characters acting carelessly with matches and pipes.

Harry's somewhat imperious behaviour and his ability to alienate those around him increases the likelihood of an arson attack, to the degree that it is almost as though he *wants* someone to light a fire so that his anxious anticipation can give way to action. Robert Dingley has argued, in a chapter primarily concerned with Harry Heathcote's mental health, that 'fear of disaster keeps Heathcote in a condition of constant edginess: his days are spent inspecting nervously the perimeter of his estate and he is apprehensive not only of bushfire but, within minutes of rain falling, of flood' (2004, 40).[12] Harry's catastrophic anxiety is inextricably bound up with time and knowledge of the seasons and what they will bring. In his mind, waiting for fire is more emotionally draining than fighting it, which at least partly accounts for the zeal with which he attempts to back-burn once his property has been attacked by an incendiarist. Back-burning is, of course, an acknowledged mode of directing a fire, as a police sergeant

registers when explaining that Harry will not 'swing' for his actions. The police officer asks Harry's accuser, 'where would the fire have gone if he hadn't kept putting it out as fast as lighting it? … And where would the other fire have gone which somebody lit, and which nobody put out, if he hadn't been there to stop it?' (Trollope [1874] n.d., 101). The strategy is a risky one, however, and it is a testament to Heathcote's (and Trollope's) understanding of fire, its pathways and its management, that he is prepared to take this drastic course of action.

Trollope ends his novella with a marriage proposal, offering his readers an accepted form of closure, but one that elides the cyclical nature of the fire season. The fire that has endangered Harry, his loved-ones, and his property is not a one-off disaster but something with which he will have to contend on an annual basis. While Trollope's narrative seems to signal a happy resolution, the reality for an anxious character like Harry is likely to have been quite different. The nineteenth-century philosopher Alexander Bain described the lingering mental unrest associated with catastrophic events like natural disasters when he wrote of the afterlife of fear, emphasizing its characteristics as a 'depressing passion' and noting that a traumatic event could lead to a 'distrust of good and anticipation of evil' (1859, 56–57). Brian Massumi articulates similar connections between the experience of trauma and the terror of its return in 'The Future Birth of the Affective Fact.' Massumi asserts,

> Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in a way that is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that. (2010, 53)

Massumi writes of what he calls the 'smoke of future fires,' reading the fire alarm through the semiotician Charles Peirce as an 'index' which 'acts upon the nerves of the person and force(s) his attention' (2010, 64). For the survivor of a fire who returns to the site of the home, there are usually two possible responses. One is what the fire historians Christine Hansen and Tom Griffiths have identified as a type of willed amnesia, in which the memory of the fire is contained by casting it as a freak event, something unnatural that can never happen again (2012, 162). The other is to live in what Massumi identifies as a state of heightened arousal, endlessly fearing the next disaster, interpreting the merest whiff of smoke as a signifier of impending catastrophe. While Trollope offers a 'happy ever after' ending to his readers, everything we have seen of Harry's personality through

the course of the novel points to a future that involves waiting for and fearing fires, and in many ways this is the lot of settlers and their descendants. Today's bush-dwellers may have the benefit of modern fire-fighting equipment, but it can only douse the flames; it cannot prevent the fire from igniting. Trauma and time thus remain enmeshed for survivors of fires, for whom every summer represents a nervous period of waiting and watching, with little sense of relief.

A poem like 'Forest Rambles in Tasmania,' which appeared in the *Tasmanian Mail* on September 13, 1879, offers insights into the vexed settler relationship with the fire-prone environment, whilst showing how time could offer hope for those willing to embrace Australia's extreme cycle of destruction and renewal. It also reveals how a European aesthetic interfered with acceptance and, to a degree, understanding of Australia's ecological extremes through the writer's efforts to render the forest familiar and welcoming. The poem – which is long and of dubious literary quality – begins with several stanzas evoking a dreamy arcadia, drawing upon well-known European conventions, including 'rocky dells' and 'elfin palaces.' There are 'caverns,' 'bubbling wells,' 'gushing brooks,' and 'sequestered nooks,' as the author – identified only by the initials 'R.L.A.D.' – creates a romanticized and rather clichéd portrait of the forest, only to disrupt it.

While the poem's speaking voice doesn't recount the actual witnessing of a bushfire, s/he returns to the spot at the end of the summer to find that a fire has passed through. The piece's tone shifts abruptly, with the speaker comparing the forest site to a 'funeral pyre' and grieving for the burnt idyll. The fire thwarts the sense of familiarity that the speaking voice had previously imposed upon the woods, as a kind of arcadia, and the poem's fairy tale dream seems to be well and truly over:

> I turned aside into rocky dells,
> And looked again at the rock-built cells;
> The beautiful, fairy-like, elfin homes,
> That now were merely the catacombs
> Of countless, fragile, and delicate things—
> Of lichens, and shells, and butterflies' wings,
> Of numberless insects bright and fair,
> Which had fled from the fire for safety there;
> But the treacherous smoke, with her stifling breath,
> Had wantonly put every one to death.

Cloying though the verse may seem to the un-sentimental reader, the lines reflect a real anguish at the destruction caused by the fire, and, as the speaker

looks for signs of the forest s/he loved, the repeated phrase 'in vain' captures both anger and a sense of futility. While reptiles emerge from logs where they had sought shelter, the speaker feels only hostility towards these scaly survivors and the 'loathsome sound of their dismal croak'. The voice reflects on the 'horrible stillness everywhere', before lamenting,

> So everything that I saw was dead;
> And my soul was filled with a morbid dread—
> A horror of something undefined—
> So that I dared not look behind,
> For fear I might see some terrible thing
> Which my brain was imagining. (R.L.A.D. 1879)

The ineffable 'terrible thing' is an unspecified something that haunts the settler imagination and which appears in many forms and media, from the nineteenth century to the present day. Often, it is not the bush but rather latent settler anxieties about who or what might be lurking there that create perceptions of uncanny land and soundscapes. Indeed, as Meaghan Morris – among others – has argued, guilt surrounding the capturing of the land is displaced onto concerns about its uncanniness and the perceived hostility of its inhabitants, both human and animal.[13] In this case, the 'terrible thing' that troubles the speaker is primarily an expression of despair at the terrible blackness of the fire-stricken forest, but it is also what emotion theorists Jan Plamper and Benjamin Lazier have termed 'fear of a safe place' (2012, 99). Thus, a space which had seemed to be a sanctuary, recognizable from the old world, is transformed by fire into something desolate, terrifying, and unknown, a place for hyper-vigilance rather than sensory abandon.

'Forest Rambles in Tasmania' ends triumphantly, registering that 'the forest would rise again' (R.L.A.D. 1879). Yet for Australian readers, recognition of a natural cycle, with renewal on the horizon, is loaded with the implication that the fire, too, will return. The safety of the 'safe place' is thereby shown to be illusory, and the 'terrible thing' which cannot be fully articulated is what Massumi would label the 'fear of future fire'. It is therefore difficult to take comfort from the idea of cyclicality, since it suggests that disaster will always be just over the horizon, making it difficult for settlers to establish an affective relationship with their new land. Rather than constituting the new Eden or Arcadia that it was frequently represented to be, Australia was for many 'a taste of hell', as the anonymous author of a short piece in the *Town and Country Journal* put it in 1905 (Anon, 1905). As settler society consolidated its knowledge of fire and its destructive capacities, writers engaged with the emotional states that it could

induce. Those who had narrowly escaped fires often found themselves unable to return to daily life, tending a landscape whose unpredictability meant that it could never again be considered home, and succumbing to an annual state of 'heightened arousal' through their knowledge and fear that fire would return.

* * *

As today's Australians attempt to rethink and reconfigure relationships to climate, we see, philosophically if not practically, 'mastery' and 'management' giving way to conciliation. It is now acknowledged that Australia's ecology is distinct, and historians and fire ecologists tell us that living with fire, or alongside it, is a more practical solution than fighting it. As the scientist Phil Cheney observed, 'At the moment, [fire] is considered as a dangerous animal which charges across the countryside whereas, in fact, it's as natural as the rain spreading across the land' (qtd. in Rose 1995, 53). Memory has a major role to play in our comfortable cohabitation with fire, and novels, stories, and poems are key to the process of memorializing fire and the strong emotions that it evokes for those who are affected by it. The work of historians like Bill Gammage and Tom Griffiths reveals that there remains much to learn from the respectful ways in which Indigenous Australians interacted with and structured their lives around fire.[14] Some writers, like Louisa Atkinson (who was born in Australia and enjoyed an outdoor upbringing), understood the need to respect and understand Indigenous fire practices, but many interpreted fire-setting for land management as arson. Howitt, for instance, expressed extreme anxiety about Indigenous fire-setters in his novel *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia* (1854) in which characters respond to a bushfire with the assumption that it has been maliciously lit by 'the natives'.[15] Settler society often wilfully misunderstood traditional ways of burning as acts of vengeance, perhaps reflecting the repressed guilt of a community living on stolen land.[16]

Very few settlers took the time to understand how the land's traditional custodians had made use of fire prior to 1788. As a result, knowledge about how and when to burn, and how to care for country, was marginalized.[17] As the Indigenous filmmaker and fire consultant Victor Steffensen has expressed it in a call to return to traditional understandings of fire, 'The country is suffering because no one knows how to look after the fire anymore' (2020, 23). Continuing land clearance and over-farming, along with the effects of global warming, have seen an increase in the frequency and number of bushfires in Australia, and with temperatures forecast to rise, the fire season looks set to become longer and more intense, as I shall discuss in more detail shortly.[18] While literary accounts of fire continue to emphasize its dramatic qualities,

today's fire stories are just as concerned with the emotional havoc a fire can wreak as with its physically destructive path, with time playing an important role in recovery and rebuilding.

* * *

Eliza Henry-Jones's recent novel *Ache* (2017) exemplifies how the bushfire novel has evolved in response to knowledge of fire's recurrent patterns and the lengthy road to recovery encountered by many survivors. Henry-Jones's work is conscious of its literary predecessors, re-working key motifs from nineteenth-century melodramas and incorporating them into time systems associated with trauma to explore Bain's 'afterlife of fear'. I draw on her work as an exemplar here because of its very self-conscious dialogue with nineteenth-century literary conventions surrounding fire.[19] Escape on horseback was inevitably a staple plot device of mid-Victorian melodramas featuring fires, where escape options were limited and staying to defend the home was often a necessity. As a consequence, depictions of escape regularly focused on the exertions of the horse, with some stories showing the creature exhausted to the point of death or near-death, while others celebrated the swiftness of their characters' rides through smoke and embers, to safety.[20] Henry-Jones's work engages with this convention but ruptures the time sequence in which it would usually appear, referencing the escape at the novel's beginning rather than reserving it as a thrilling climax to bring about romantic closure.

As a professional trauma counsellor, Eliza Henry-Jones is concerned, not with the immediacy of the fire, but with its lengthy aftermath. Thus, while readers see and smell the fire which has affected the characters, it is in fact long-extinguished, and we experience it through vivid flashbacks and stifling dreams. Henry-Jones mediates the horseback escape in a similar manner, bringing it into the novel's opening pages through her protagonist Annie's discomfort at newspaper headlines. Annie, who – along with her young daughter, Pip – is clearly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, has survived a bushfire which took place more than a year before the novel begins. Trapped by fire on the mountain where she grew up, Annie gallops to safety with Pip and is photographed by the press, who publish her image with headlines that include 'MOTHER OF THE YEAR. HERO MOTHER. WOMAN SAVES DAUGHTER. RIDE OF A LIFETIME' (2017, 8). As the story unfolds, with Annie and Pip's return to the mountain, we are gradually able to piece together events through analepsis. We learn that the mother and daughter are reeling from the terror of not only what comes to be known as their 'NIGHTMARE RIDE' (124), but also leaving Gladys, Annie's grandmother, on the mountain, where she dies under a falling tree. In

a scene that forms a dialogue with J.S. Borlase's 'Twelve Miles Broad' [21] (1885), a bleak story of arson, rescue, and trauma, Gladys insists that Annie must ride away with Pip and their horse, Luna:

> 'Then the smoke hit us. And it was like the end of the world, with everything flying everywhere. And Nana was convinced the fire was coming straight for us. She told me to take Pip and go'. Annie closes her eyes. She can see Gladys's face, red and sticky and stern. 'She said she'd throw me over and smack Luna's rump if she had to. She said I had to. For Pip'. (212)

As Annie continues to recount her memories, it becomes clear that Gladys knew she would die and that it is the force of her extraordinary will that drives Annie to the bottom of the mountain. Like the stubborn father of Borlase's story, who turns a gun on himself when he sees that there is only one horse to carry his daughter and son-in-law to safety, Gladys sacrifices her life for the younger generation. And like Gretchen, the young heroine of 'Twelve Miles Broad', Annie must live with a mixture of guilt and trauma, stemming from the circumstances surrounding her escape.

Time does not heal Borlase's Gretchen, who is clearly traumatized by the burnt landscape she sees from her window, and whose husband determines that moving away is the only course of action that will enable her recovery. Henry-Jones's Annie has a very different relationship to place, however, and *Ache* is primarily a story of reconciliation and recovery. Time, for Annie, is marked by 'before the fires' and 'since the fires', phrases that are repeated throughout the work as a way of distinguishing her pre- and post-fire identities. The fire is present through her memories but also in the dynamics of the community to which she returns, where many minor characters show psychological damage and a need to apportion blame. The fear of future fire is intermittently present, through references to the parched ground and hot weather, radio reports of fire elsewhere, and manifest anxiety – particularly on the part of Pip.

Through her persistence in remaining on the mountain, Annie is able to re-configure her relationship both to the disaster site and to fire. While the local community is suspicious of her as someone who has been away for too long and because of her connection to the man who accidentally set the bushfire, Annie continues to insist that she *belongs* on the mountain. This assertion of 'belonging' is a clear statement of the character's affective connection to 'her' place, but it is also problematic, in that it elides the equally traumatic stories of those whose ancestors were driven from the mountain. In addition to re-staging

the thrilling rescue of the Victorian settler melodrama, Annie also reaffirms nineteenth-century settler society's act of dispossession through her insistence that she and the mountain are connected. Through returning to the locus of their trauma, Annie and Pip are able to confront the events of the previous summer and to heal in a way they could not when they returned to the city. Part of their recovery is simply about returning to a place that is renewing itself and allowing memories to surface as they are prompted by specific locations, smells, and weather conditions. Another aspect of their recuperation is, though, associated with asserting control over memories and fire itself, and Henry-Jones interlaces the two when she depicts her characters building a summer bonfire and feeding it with objects that have become over-burdened with memories. Annie's initial response to the blaze, which is started by her mother, is to declare, 'I haven't been near fire since …' (2017, 248), but then she is drawn to its warmth and brightness. She elects to burn the photograph of herself, her daughter, and the horse, taken at the bottom of the mountain on the day of the fire. The narrator comments, 'She holds the photo out over the fire and watches it eddy in the heat. Then she lets go. She watches herself burn' (248). As Annie burns a past (and to her, an inauthentic) version of herself, the child Pip hurls in the pull-up nappies she has worn to cope with traumatized bed-wetting and a scarf that she wore obsessively to comfort herself. The fire offers catharsis to these characters who have escaped its physical ravages but who have been scarred by it all the same. It also offers a fleeting moment of control, in which Annie and her family are able to face the fire once more and to overcome or subdue it. Yet to a reader familiar with Australia's ecology, this scene is, like its nineteenth-century forerunners, underpinned by a tacit understanding that the bushfire will return in time.

Annie's decision to live permanently on the mountain may seem foolhardy. There are those, however, who continue to rebuild homes in fire-torn areas, disregarding – through their sense of attachment to place – the knowledge that in time fire always returns. Rebuilding a house may be an important way of beginning to rebuild a life, and for some it is also an act of defiance, a reassertion of their lives before the fire, and an attempt to resist the 'present-ism' that a natural disaster can command. Henry-Jones's novel is a work of reconciliation, giving legitimacy to the emotions experienced by those who have endured a 'taste of hell', while at the same time suggesting ways to live with and alongside fire.

Like her Victorian predecessors, Henry-Jones understands that time and fire are inextricably bound together, but in focusing on the catastrophe's aftermath – rather than its immediate and attention-commanding occurrence – she opens up an alternative understanding of time, stressing patience and the confronta-

tion of memories rather than the willed amnesia that so often characterizes settler tales of survival. Through her traumatized characters and their fears of past, future, and present conflagrations, Henry-Jones signals a means to assimilate the fire season into the modern-day settler's identity. She transforms fire into part of the history of the land, and by dwelling on what can be made from its aftermath, both in aesthetic and emotional terms, she shows the possibility of departure from the cycle of watching and waiting.

* * *

Human-generated climate change is altering our sense of time. Fire seasons across the world are becoming longer and more intense, with the intervals between catastrophic burns diminishing. Nineteenth-century bushfire literature emphasizes the distinct seasonality of the fire season in a way that today's novelists simply cannot. Landscapes in contemporary Australian fiction, such as the novels of Jane Harper, are tinder dry and ready to explode into flame at any moment.[22] As the 'Black Summer' fires, which ravaged Australia in 2019–20, have shown, bushfires are no longer the fleeting events of melodramatic tales, they are a sustained threat. Stephen J. Pyne coined the phrase 'Forever Fires' to encapsulate the shift in fire ecology that fire-prone nations like Australia are now experiencing (2021, 116). As Tom Griffiths puts it, 'the name signals the change Pyne perceives in fire behaviour, from occasional visitations to total engulfment, which is the predicament of the Pyrocene, a new Fire Age comparable to past Ice Ages' (2021, 18). Griffiths goes on to reference the Australian novelist and environmental campaigner James Bradley, who warned in response to the same fires:

> [T]his is not the new normal. This is just the beginning. The rolling disasters we are now experiencing are the result of 1°C of warming above pre-industrial averages. Even if the commitments enshrined in the Paris agreement are met – something that looks extremely unlikely – we are on track for well over 2°C of warming by the end of the century, while on current trends we are headed for 3°C or 4°C. (2020)

Both Bradley and Griffiths highlight a new and alarming relationship between fire and time, noting not only a frighteningly extended burning season, but also gesturing to the limited time left to humanity to reverse or at least slow the effects of global warming. Victorian readers could enjoy the thrill of a rescue scene, safe in the knowledge that fire days were few and far between each year. Yet, as Henry-Jones demonstrates in *Ache* through Annie's return to the moun-

tain, for readers of the near future that rescue might need to be repeated over and over, but without intervals of relief to allow for the processing of trauma.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted that the origins of today's crisis lie in attempts to deny the smallness of the human place in deep time. As he expresses it:

> Our embodied selves and our institutions did not evolve to deal with problems that could span geological scales of time. We evolved by taking the work of deep time as given and, over the last couple of hundred years, became 'modern' by coming to think of the world around us as something that existed 'for us'. (2021, 203)

He continues to remark that, 'the assumption that the world is there mainly to provide a background for the drama of human history to unfold has met with a rude shock (dramatically illustrated by the massive and tragic Australian fires of 1919-20)' (2021, 203). While Chakrabarty's discussion here does not extend to literary texts, his comments sharply reframe the significance of the bushfire plot. Examining the writing I have discussed in this essay through Chakrabarty's lens, even the oldest settler fire stories come to typify an anthropocentrism which may have left us literally out of time. With their emphases on saving the farm or rescuing the endangered settler, settler bushfire narratives and poems reveal an over-investment in individualism that is at odds with the holistic approach our ecosystem requires. Stories of fire in the future will be quite different from the horseback heroics of nineteenth-century texts, and distinct again from *Ache*'s revisiting of past trauma. Rescues will cease to be individual acts of bravery, and may prove to be altogether impossible in some settings. As Deborah Bird Rose warns in her work on the 'Anthropocene Noir', loss will become a much more significant element of the stories, both in fiction and in fact (2013/14, 206–219).[23] Rose has commented on the crisis:

> In a degrading and dying world, at this very moment creation itself is coming unstuck, disintegrating right back to the beginning. So, that dizzying sense of time running all over the place confronts me vividly as I try to think about this great unmaking – an unmaking of the possibilities for the future that is also an unmaking of all the work and care of the generations that have preceded us. (2013/14, 217)

However, in spite of the apocalyptic nature of this vision, which recalls the 'hell' experienced by early settlers, for Rose it can still be a moment of opportunity and hope. The impending environmental disaster, for her, signals that now is the time to abandon linear ideas of a progressive modernity, which have led us

to a point at which we are all protagonists in a 'story without a known ending' with a 'looming sense of fatality; the creeping awareness that nothing can be put right' (2013/14, 215). For Rose, humans are both criminals and victims in the climate change catastrophe, triggering our own apocalypse. Yet, if we move beyond the settler emphasis on the individual story to think and act in a more collective way, we might still be able to back away from the more expansive 'taste of hell' that the future seems to threaten.

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NOTES

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2 For an account of settlers and their changing understandings of fire, see Moore (2015).

3 As Bill Gammage has noted (2011, particularly chapter six), Indigenous Australians used fire to 'manage' the land, but they did so judiciously and with sensitivity to regional vegetation.

4 Black Thursday (February 6, 1851) was a terrifying day for Australian settler society, and it is believed that almost a quarter of the state of Victoria burned. The loss of life was surprisingly low, with official figures reporting twelve deaths. However, it is believed that many deaths may have gone unrecorded, and the loss of livestock was significant: more than a million sheep died, along with tens of thousands of cattle. There are, of course, no figures to reflect the deaths of wild animals. For an account of the development of the settler bushfire narrative, see Morgan (2021, i–xv).

5 For a discussion of melodrama and bushfires, see Moore (2011; 2014).

6 I use the term 'Bush' here in its Australian sense to signify the vast countryside. See Watson (2014) for a detailed account of the Australian landscape and its role in both popular culture and the literary imagination.

7 A 'squatter' was the name given to those who took possession of Crown land by grazing their livestock upon it illegally. A number of squatters made great fortunes and became economically and politically powerful.

8 Howitt was drawn to Victoria by the Gold Diggings and, despite the brevity of his time in Australia, he published a number of works featuring bush life, including *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia* (1854b) and *The History of Discovery in Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand* (1865).

9 The *Portland Guardian* continues to note of a farmer, 'Mr. Millard had the whole of his crops destroyed, and the work of years was swept away in a few hours from those industrious families. Their fences, their crops and houses were annihilated at a stroke' (Howitt 1854, 67) emphasizing how fire can alter the course of imagined futures by effacing assets, carefully built up over years.

10 See Moore (2021b) for discussions of Atkinson's representation of both climatic difference and land clearance in Australia.

11 In her nature writing, Atkinson shows a deep respect for Indigenous Australian custodianship of the land, which makes this scene somewhat incongruous. It may be that the sensational genre of *Tressa's Resolve* did not allow for an explanation of Indigenous fire practices. Furthermore, the work was published posthumously, and it is impossible to determine whether Atkinson would have revised this scene, had she not died prematurely. See Moore (2021a) for a discussion of Atkinson and Indigenous Australian culture.

12 For a full account of Harry's fear of fire, see Moore (2014).

13 See, for instance, Morris (2006) and Holloway and Rutherford (2010) for accounts of guilt and the Australian landscape.

14 See Gammage (2011) for a discussion of Indigenous fire practices; Griffiths (2001); Hansen and Griffiths (2012).

15 Howitt (1854b), 140. See Howitt (1854b) 140–142 for the scene in its entirety.

16 See Moore (2014) for a more detailed discussion of settler guilt and Indigenous fire-setting.

17 While registering the many intangible and elusive qualities of 'country', I take my understanding of the term from Deborah Bird Rose:

> Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun, but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy … country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life'. (1996: 7).

18 Helen Cleugh *et al.* present models of the consequences of global warning, arguing that by 2050 the number of days of extreme fire danger may have increased by somewhere between 50 and 300 per cent, depending upon the acceleration of climate change (2011, 48). Victor Steffenson has argued forcefully that what is needed to reverse colonial damage to Australia's fire ecology is 'A skilled team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that works…with the entire community, agencies and emergency services to deliver an effective and educational strategy into the future. One that is culturally based and connects to all the benefits for community' (2020: 213).

19 There are, of course, many other contemporary novels, which depict bushfires. Examples include Amanda Lohrey, *Vertigo* (2008) and Inga Simpson's *The Last Woman in the World* (2022). Helen Fitzgerald's *Ash Mountain* (2020) is particularly concerned with distinguishing between the time before and after a fire, and in examining how trauma can affect human experiences of temporality. Carol Lefevre's short story 'Sisters in a Garden' (2020) offers an intense examination of trauma's extended aftermath through its depiction of two sisters responding to their mother's death in a bushfire. Lefevre focuses on both the fire's immediate effects, before shifting her narrative to examine the two girls as adults. See Schauble (2022) for an overview of Australian bushfire fiction.

20 Both Ellen Clacy's 'A Bush Fire' (1854) and William Howitt's *Black Thursda*y (1854) feature horse deaths, while Atkinson's *Tressa's Resolve* (1872) draws attention to the physical demands that escape could make on horses who were both exhausted and dehydrated from the heat.

21 'Twelve Miles Broad' appeared in the Christmas number of the *Australian Journal*. Set during the festive season, the narrator details how a vengeful swagman, Jim Baldwin, emerges from the bush and attempts to invite himself to join him, his wife, Gretchen, and his father-in-law, Matthew, for their Christmas meal. When the family refuses to allow him to join them, Baldwin starts a fire.

22 See Harper's *The Dry* (2016) for a vivid and popular rendition of the drought-ridden landscape of New South Wales.

23 As an example, the threat to the critically endangered Leadbeater's possum is heightened by the increase in bushfires, which destroy its habitat.

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