THE COUNTRY OF LOST CHILDREN
An Australian Anxiety

From stories of colonial children lost in the bush to the recent cases of Graeme Thorne, Azaria Chamberlain and Jaidyn Leskie, the figure of the lost child has haunted the Australian imagination. Peter Pierce’s original and sometimes shocking study The Country of Lost Children traces this ambivalent and disturbing history.

In the nineteenth century the idea of losing one’s child to a strange and silent country reflected the depth of white settlers’ distrust of their new land and its Aboriginal inhabitants. Thus it offers insights into the passing of a vital early opportunity for reconciliation between European and indigenous Australians. In the twentieth century the lost child continues to torment the national consciousness, but no longer as the bewildered wanderer in the bush. The emblematic lost child of modern Australia is a victim of white society itself; of abuse, abandonment or abduction. Drawing on a wide range of sources, from poetry, fiction and newspaper reports to paintings and films, The Country of Lost Children analyses the cultural and moral implications of the lost child in our history and illuminates a crucial aspect of our present condition. At its core are confronting, often troubling, questions about childhood itself.

In memory of my mother

Phyllis Pierce (1916–1997)
THE COUNTRY
OF LOST CHILDREN
An Australian Anxiety

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521594998

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First published 1999

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication Data
Pierce, Peter, 1950- .
The country of lost children: an Australian anxiety.

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 59440 5.

1. Missing children in literature. 2. Missing children in
art. 3. Abandoned children in literature. 4. Abandoned
children in art. 5. Children in motion pictures. I. Title.
700.452054

ISBN 978-0-521-59440-0 Hardback

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Acknowledgements

Anyone trying to understand the phenomenon of the lost child in Australia is indebted to the pioneering work of Leigh Astbury in City Bushmen. He is also a mate, and one whose detailed criticisms of sections of this manuscript saved me from embarrassment. Parts of the book have appeared in print in different forms before: I thank the Age Monthly Review, The Critical Review and Eureka Street for the opportunities to test ideas while the work was in progress and – in the first instance – before it had been fully conceived. It was a significant help to have been able to lecture on aspects of this subject thence to profit from the comments and suggestions of audiences at James Cook University, the State Library of Victoria (at the annual Redmond Barry Lecture for the Friends of the State Library), the Sydney Writers’ Centre, Rozelle and at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

I would like to thank the staffs of the State Library of Victoria, the Monash University library, the James Cook University library, the National Library of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archive and the National Gallery of Victoria for the unfailingly kind and constructive assistance that they have given me. For permission to quote from her poem ‘Precipice’, I thank Judith Wright. For permission to use stills from their films I wish to thank John Heyer and John Heyer Film Company Pty Ltd (The Back of Beyond), Patricia Lovell and Picnic Productions Pty Ltd (Picnic at Hanging Rock), Sandra Gross and Yoram Gross and Village Roadshow Pty Ltd (Dot and the Kangaroo), Ian Pearce and the Archives Office of Tasmania (Manganinnie), Don Famulok and Crawford Productions (Fortress) and for arranging for their reproduction, Tamara Osička of the National Film and Sound Archive. Jeff Doyle came to my aid with material on The Back of Beyond and Walkabout, while Michelle Boaler assisted in the search for permissions.
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THE COUNTRY OF LOST CHILDREN

My colleagues at James Cook University and Monash University have greatly assisted in my thinking about this book. In particular I wish to thank Robin Gerster (for the title), Richard Lansdown (for clarifying the notion of the child as surrogate for the parent in nineteenth-century narratives), Gina Mercer (for suggestions on Beverley Farmer and Leone Sperling), Tony Hassall (for directing me to Peter Carey’s ‘A Small Testament’), Greg Manning (for explaining to me the good reasons why what looked as though it should have been the middle part of the book was missing) and Carmel Lloyd for technical, but more importantly moral support throughout the time I have been in Townsville. I am grateful for the Chair establishment grant that I received from James Cook University: it was a vital aid in this research. My thanks also go to Heather Jamieson for her meticulous and good-humoured editing of the manuscript and to Phillipa McGuinness of Cambridge University Press, for commissioning the book and loyally supporting it thereafter.

My gratitude goes as always to Rae and Catherine, who know better than anyone the difficult circumstances, of absence and anxiety, in which The Country of Lost Children was written.
Introduction

In a riddling passage of Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines* (1987), the Russian-born Arkady – whom the author has met during his travels into the interior of Australia – questions an Aboriginal elder. Arkady is in search of knowledge of the kind of which Chatwin’s book will often presume to speak, and to comprehend. In particular, he inquires of the Aboriginal sacred sites that might be trespassed upon in the event of the construction of the proposed railway line between Alice Springs and Darwin. The elder, who is the last of his clan in this part of the country, chooses to tell Arkady something of what is sacred to Aborigines in the region. He relates the story of the Babies. Born following a transgression of Akuka, the Bandicoot Man, the Babies fell into floodwaters near Lizard Rock and melted. Without reckoning the cryptic character of this answer, which seems to indicate the sacrifice of children because of the guilt of one of their parents, Arkady reaches for a sententious generalisation. He says, ‘slowly’, that ‘Australia ... is the country of lost children’.

This book, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*, takes its title from Arkady’s throwaway line. The notion is shocking; that Australia is the place where the innocent young are most especially in jeopardy. Standing for girls and boys of European origin who strayed into the Australian bush, the lost child is an arresting figure in the history and the folklore of colonial Australia. More profoundly though, the lost child is the symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties within the white settler communities of this country. The loss of their children blighted the lives of many pioneering Australians. Stories of boys’ or girls’ endurance and suffering, of their deaths or providential rescues, were related throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. They made vivid
appearances in many mediums: painting and pantomime, fiction and photograph, verse and fairytale.

What were the meanings of these stories? Ostensibly, and poignantly, they told of the danger for children of wandering away from settled areas into the trackless bush. The abiding force of the figure of the lost child has, however, deeper and darker origins and implications. The forlorn girls and boys, bereft, disoriented and crying in a wilderness that is indifferent, if not actively hostile to them, stand also for the older generation, that of their parents. Symbolically, the lost child represents the anxieties of European settlers because of the ties with home which they have cut in coming to Australia, whether or not they journeyed here by choice. The figure of the child stands in part for the apprehensions of adults about having sought to settle in a place where they might never be at peace.

Narratives of lost children in the colonial period in Australia are concentrated in the second half of the nineteenth century. In fiction, that span can be marked by Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859) and Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (1903). Both those novels drew on real incidents of lost children, as well as the consequent folklore of the searches that were mounted for them, and their outcomes. There is an intense cross-fertilisation between the reported and the imagined tales of children lost in the bush. Such a process helped to ensure the indelibility of this aspect of pioneering experience in Australia. Lost children united rural communities in this country in colonial times, as desperately their members sought to find the lost ones alive. Subsequently, they might have to unite in mourning. The communal remembrances of the stories of children lost in the bush begins, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, to take on a generic, composite air; thus to become the stuff of cautionary legend as well as of plaintive history.

Yet these are not stories confined, or peculiar to the lives of European Australians. A crucial element in many nineteenth-century narratives of lost children is the role played by Aboriginal trackers, who are summoned either just in time, or too late for their skills to have ensured a rescue. In the period covered in the first part of this book, roughly the second half of the last century, European children were often taken by the land. The lodgment of settlers in this country had always been fraught with natural perils. It was compromised as well by uncertainty about their moral rights to be here. Yet the bush was alluring, so that children strayed contentedly into it, only to lose themselves, perhaps forever. Often they were saved by Aboriginal men who had been dispossessed of this same land. Here, potentially, was a most potent image
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of reconciliation between black and white Australians. All too soon, it was forgotten.

_The Country of Lost Children_ is divided into two parts. The first of them, already sketched in outline, is called ‘In the Nineteenth Century: Discovering the Lost Child’. Its primary purpose is to present and to analyse a succession of narratives in different media in which the cultural significances of the figure of the lost child were imagined and interpreted. The ‘discovery’ is therefore on the one hand literal, because it deals with lost boys and girls, living and dead, and the effects of the loss of them on the communities from which they came. On the other hand it is metaphorical, for the figure of the lost child becomes a vital means for European Australians in the latter half of the nineteenth century to express and understand the insecurities of their position in a land that was new to many of them, and strange to all.

The second part of the book, ‘In the Twentieth Century: The Child Abandoned’, covers the period from the 1950s until the century’s end. That is, there is an hiatus between this span of time and that of ‘Discovering the Lost Child’. It is not the case that the lost child altogether disappears from artists’ or reporters’ views in the first half of this century. For instance, there are lost child episodes in Mary Grant Bruce’s novels _Glen Eyre_ (1912) and _Grant’s Hollow_ (1914). They end happily. Charles Chauvel’s novel, _Uncivilised_, which he filmed in 1936, is a lost child story too, although it owes more to Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan tales (which began with _Tarzan of the Apes_ in 1914) than to indigenous Australian traditions. In Chauvel’s story, the son of white missionaries, who has been lost as a child in the wilds of Australia, is brought up by an Aboriginal tribe. On reaching adulthood, he becomes its chief. Such a result is utterly incongruous in the history of relations between black men and white children in earlier Australian lost child narratives, however gratifying an imperialist fantasy it may have been.

Put schematically, and without any attempt at an inclusive cultural explanation, the first period covered by this book (from the 1850s until the turn of the century) describes how European children were taken by the land. In the missing half century (in this analysis, at least), from c. 1900 until the 1950s, much imaginative writing, both fiction and poetry, was concerned to offer a retrospect on the taking of the land from its Aboriginal inhabitants by European pioneers and settlers. This is the material of the saga fiction of Eleanor Dark, Brian Penton, ‘Barnard Eldershaw’ and others. Children lost in places they might not belong focussed anxieties not only over legitimacy of land tenure, but of European Australians’ spiritual and psychological lodging. While these anxieties were over-ridden in the narratives of progress that the
saga literature favoured, by the mid-1950s new and sharper versions of that old anxiety were again being expressed in Australia.

With the lost child stories of the previous century, they shared an ambivalence about the future. Their essential unlikeness was that the agency of loss of children was now the human rather than the natural world. That is, it was purposeful, rather than accidental. The narratives of the book’s second part, ‘The Child Abandoned’, tell of terrible crimes against the young, whether these were committed by institutions charged with their welfare, or as the result of individual malevolence, or simply out of heedlessness as to the fate of children who were at risk. Considered first are theatrical treatments of the lost child; then the representations of the figure in fiction; next the adaptation of books into film. Uncommon angles of view on these genres and the authors working within them are opened. The figure of the lost child has the power to reach into unexpected quarters; freshly to illuminate some reputations, perhaps to revise others.

The final section of this part of the book, ‘True Stories’, traverses terrible ground. Its subjects are actual incidents of the abduction, murder, sexual molestation, abandonment and brutalising of the young in Australia. So severe and disturbing are many of these episodes, that it can seem that a kind of national death wish has overcome Australia. The last of these stories concerns the experiences of Aboriginal Australians. In treating of the children of the so-called ‘stolen generation’, the book has turned full circle; gone back in truth and in metaphor to the Aboriginal ‘lost child’ of whom Charles Tompson’s poem ‘Blacktown’ (1826) had spoken so long before.

The stories of these people, children long lost to their families, is one among many narratives in this book, albeit one of the most significant and harrowing of them. Where once the land indifferently took lost Australian children of European origin, now Aboriginal children were systematically taken away from their land. If these bodies of suffering and story can be connected, then the process of reconciliation between European and Aboriginal Australians, which can be glimpsed at times in the colonial tales of lost children, might be advanced in ways that do not allow regression to an age that once we thought of as less enlightened than this.

To speak specifically of an ‘Australian anxiety’ in the course of retelling and interpreting this selection of lost child narratives from two half centuries of the history of this country, might seem unwarrantably to privilege this national experience. What might be gleaned from the comparison of Australian with European and American accounts of lost children? First, that the differences between them are more striking in
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the nineteenth than in the twentieth century. Thus, among the collections of tales that the Brothers Grimm made early in the last century, the forests in which children were lost were perilous places, not because of any natural threats that they posed, but for the malevolent people who lived within them, better to prey on the young. Australian tellers of fairy stories in the 1890s, necessarily writing with the Grimms in mind, naturalised the Germanic material earnestly, but often incongruously. They neither found, nor fabricated, plausible human threats to lost children.

Writing in the present time of a medieval legend – that of the monstrous Bluebeard – in Gilles et Jeanne (1983, translated into English in 1987), the French novelist Michel Tournier imagined a connection between the martyr Jeanne d’Arc and the nobleman Gilles de Rais (Bluebeard). After the Maid of Orleans was burned at the stake, Gilles’s obsession with her was perversely transferred to the exulant capture, sexual abuse and murder of children in his castle, Táfflages. This short novel gives us more of the sense of historical analogy than of period fiction. As it describes a rigorous, intellectualised cruelty towards the young, Tournier’s novel resonates in our age, whatever the motives of its murderous protagonist may have been long ago.

Gustav Mahler wrote his Kinder-totenlieder between 1901 and 1904; they were first performed in the following year. These ‘Songs on the Death of Children’, based on poems by Friedrich Rueckert, were an immemorial lament, freed from the present time, the more deeply to encourage grieving. For example the fourth song, ‘Oft denk’ ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen’, is an attempt at consolation which knows itself to be in vain:

I often think they have only gone out,
And soon they will be home again!
The day is lovely! Oh, be not afraid!
They have only gone out for a long walk!

The fifth and last song, ‘In diesem Wetter!’ is reproachful, although it is not clear who is being blamed for the loss of children:

In such weather, in such a storm,
I would never have sent the children out!
They have been carried off, been carried off!
I was not allowed to say a word!

Coincident with while altogether unaware of the late colonial treatments of the lost child material by Lawson and Furphy, the Kinder-totenlieder, the
poems by Rueckert that Mahler set to music, are yet similarly ambivalent. Both hostile nature and malign human interference appear to have played roles in the fates of the children.

Much nearer to this century’s end, there is no such ambivalence in Ian McEwan’s novel, *The Child in Time* (1987). In the hotter, crueller Britain that McEwan imagines, a dictatorial female rules the country. Beggars are licensed and an official revision of benign, Wordsworthian, Romantic attitudes towards childhood innocence has been undertaken. The selfishness of children is now the publicly affirmed belief of the government. Parents are sanctioned to discipline their young. Corporal punishment is approved and ‘the nation is to be regenerated by reformed childcare practice’. Among other experts, the Official Commission on Childcare Practice has enlisted the best-selling children’s book author who is McEwan’s protagonist. The horror of this man’s life is characteristic of the modern, not of a future world. This is the loss of his daughter Kate, who was abducted in a supermarket, while her father was momentarily distracted. This irreparable, arbitrary, tormenting bereavement is, for McEwan’s hero, a cruelty too mysterious to fathom. The title of the novel, *The Child in Time*, advert not just to the loss of a loved, especial daughter, but to an institutional hardening of the line against the younger generation. This is besides the seemingly casual destruction of their lives that is a daily occurrence. McEwan was alert to many recent outrages – in public and private – against children. Rightly he suspected that there were worse to come.

In the United States, as in Europe, the modern record of the reasons for the losses of children is sadly similar to that in Australia. Adults prey murderously on the young on both sides of the Atlantic. A desperate and disappointed man killed sixteen children at Dunblane in Scotland. In Belgium, the paedophile, Marc Dutroux, abducted, sexually abused and killed four girls. Two of them starved to death in his cellar while he was in gaol for other offences. Worse even than this, perhaps, are the crimes of children against each other. In 1993, the then ten-year-old British boys Robert Thompson and Jon Venables kidnapped two-year-old James Bulger, and killed him on a nearby railway line. In the United States, the murders of pre-teenage children by those of their own age is a circumstance regular enough to have dulled its power to shock.

Earlier periods of American and European history offer differing comparative cultural evidence from the Australian accounts of lost children. For example, the signal lost child figures in North American history, fiction and folklore are the victims of Indian captivity, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From such durance, they may or may not have been released, after suffering whatever kinds of harm. Richard Slotkin traced the cultural reading of their narratives in
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Regeneration Through Violence (1973). In The Searchers (1956) film director John Ford had set his favourite hero John Wayne on the trail of his niece, abducted by Comanches. In the course of this quest, the hero, Ethan Edwards, had determined that once a lost girl has been taken by Indians, she can never truly be restored to her community. In consequence, she would be better dead. This situation did not resemble the circumstances of Australian racial contact history and the literature which re-imagined it. That would, after all, have required notions of Aborigines as more palpably and threateningly human than were often conceded.

The most famous lost child in nineteenth-century fiction in the United States also bears scant likeness to his Australian contemporaries. This is the thrice lost hero of Mark Twain’s novel, Huckleberry Finn (1884). Because of his ne’er-do-well father and his rebellious reluctance to submit to the civilising influences of the Widow Douglas and others, Huck is already an outcast within his community. He becomes literally lost when – as a means of escape from the violent, drunken Pap Finn – he fakes his own death. Previous efforts to save him, through well-intentioned attempts at his moral redemption, had never made much ground. Now Huck has freed himself for the journey – too briefly idyllic – down the Mississippi River with the fugitive Negro Jim.

In the nineteenth century, Australian children had few opportunities to be lost in this way. The unsettled country into which they might venture was markedly inhospitable and unpopulated. Thus the option of losing oneself deliberately was merely foolhardy. Huck, it needs also to be said, embraced a third kind of loss. At the end of the novel he determines to ‘light out’ for the Indian Territory, ‘ahead of the rest’. In the colonial period, the Australian frontier offered no such prospect of anonymous vanishing into the interior. There may have been a limitless horizon in this country, but not one that offered shelter.

Neither, in the twentieth century, was there respite for those children who were doomed to be lost in cities, preyed upon by strangers, cut off from their families, often finding themselves in mortal jeopardy. A nihilistic wish to deny them a future seems to have inspired the actions of many who held responsibility for the young. What such behaviour, such a will to thwart the chances, or the very being, of the next generation might portend is the essential business, descriptive of a pervasive anxiety, that the second part of this book confronts. It does so without claiming fully to comprehend the springs of that anxiety, or to find any but partial ways of consolation.

Yet The Country of Lost Children is written in hope, out of a humanist belief that the rehearsal of stories of our past, with all their obscurities and complexities, can still illumine how in Australia we came to be as we are, a people persistently fearful of where we are lodged in place and
time. Further, if the analysis of current anxieties concerning an Australian future, as revealed by factual and imaginative witnesses, shows this anxiety to be so deep and wretched and scarcely examined that the next generation is set at hazard, then these stories must be addressed as a matter of moral and cultural urgency. An inquiry into them can enrich us all. I trust that it may. Otherwise, Australia, ‘the country of lost children’, may become the place where the post-medieval Western notion of childhood dies first.