RETURNING TO NOTHING

For S. K. Jeffery

RETURNING TO NOTHING

THE MEANING OF LOST PLACES

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A. Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*

'And the bulldozers are here, I see?'
The neighbours went
One by one,
The Johnson's house next door:
One day, men on the roof
Throwing down tiles
Smashing them in the garden.
Curtains still at the windows
Carpet on the floor
All ruined.
Bulldozer in the living room
pushing down walls.
Ken loved his pool
Cleaned it every day.
The bulldozer dug it up in an afternoon.

Julia Garnett, Extract from 'The Turpentine Tree'
Orchard Rd, Beecroft
February 1995

PREFACE

The places round the billabong
are pretty much the way they were
but like a lot of things, they're gone.
Philip Hodgins[1]

Hodgins wrote these words after he returned to the locations of his childhood to find them unrecognisable, changed or destroyed. This book is a history of the migrations away from dying homes, streets, neighbourhoods, suburbs, towns, cities and countries—and the return journeys to the empty spaces where once they were. I have called these journeys, which can take place either on the ground or in the mind, 'returning to nothing'.

Often the journey to nothing is actual. Kass Hancock returned to Darwin twenty years after Cyclone Tracy had destroyed her home and almost the entire suburb of Wagaman. The house opposite the place she had lived, where two little children had been killed, had vanished and the street itself was almost unrecognisable. Cracks in the pavement in Wagaman Terrace were almost the only tangible reminder of many sunny days and of one dreadful night.[2] The returning journey to a lost place can also be metaphorical. Dorothy Hewett, in her poem 'In Summer', imagined herself going back for a look to her childhood home, listening to the ever-flowing rip in the darkness outside as it closed about the family and the dwelling. She saw herself walking among her brothers and sisters playing 'Ricketty Kate', telling them which card to play—with the exact knowledge of what unpleasant fates would befall each of her family members.[3]

Returning to Nothing owes its immediate origins to a project, sponsored by the Australian Research Council, into the ways in which Australians relate to and value country of significance to them. I had already worked with several rural families for more than a year

studying contemporary attachments, when, while holidaying near the site of the drowned town of Old Adaminaby in the southern highlands of New South Wales, I bought a book of local history entitled *It Doesn't Snow like it used to*.[4] In the first chapter was part of a poem called 'Adaminaby The Old Town'.

> The stations, farms, the sheds, the barns,
> Are all awash in the deep waters
> While ghosts of men swim through the glen,
> Drowned faces haunt their sons and daughters.[5]

The theme of this book was decided at that moment. Half a dozen trips to talk to the mourning former residents of Adaminaby confirmed what Douglas Stewart meant by:

> the mystery and the pathos
> that seep from earth and bubble out from water
> In any place where men have lived and bred
> And feuded with each other.[6]

I had embarked on a journey which to most of the people who spoke to me was a painful process of mourning and grief, and to me was also one of enlightenment. Almost always accompanied by someone to whom the site was dear, I explored the ruins or sites of homesteads and country towns, houses which had been sold and the locations of former parks and neighbourhoods. For the last chapter I began work in Beecroft, Sydney, where several home owners whose suburb lay in the path of the F2 Freeway shared their feelings of their last and hopeless battle against the New South Wales Roads and Traffic Authority.

My own explorations of lost places began when, as a fourteen-year-old growing up on the north shore of Sydney, I was fascinated by stories of two of my ancestors. Robert and Selina Pockley had built a house called Lorne in Killara, which in 1924 had been compulsorily purchased and demolished for the construction of a reservoir. Though this had occurred more than forty years previously, I felt that its destruction continued to haunt my older relatives. My grandmother knew which article of furniture had gone to which relative and was able to

draw an exact plan of the house. My mother had a collection of press clippings about the estate and its controversial resumption, which I stuck into a scrapbook and wrote about. I made my first journey to nothing: I found no trace of Lorne besides the avenue of that name which runs beside the reservoir. Lorne began to haunt me, though in a much less personal way than it did those to whom the house was a living memory. My mother gave me a painting of an enormous azalea bush executed the year before the estate was resumed. Had it been painted because the artist knew that soon it must be destroyed?

My granny revealed that prior to building Lorne, the Pockleys had lived in a house called Doohat in North Sydney. Now I rushed to that dead place also. Like Lorne, its presence was commemorated by a named avenue. Unlike Lorne, the site was still unoccupied even in the busy Miller Street of 1959. Half a dozen pine trees towered about the foundations of what had been a substantial home. Heart thumping, I explored the site, and peeping over a back fence found part of a weathered sandstone fountain which obviously didn't belong to the small suburban garden in which it now stood. Click went the Box Brownie, and another artefact was added to the breathless historian's mental cupboard of lost places. Thirty-six years later my heart was thumping again, as camera in hand I surveyed the wreckage of the drowned town of Adaminaby, unexpectedly and harshly revealed by the drought which had drained Lake Eucumbene to 25 m below high water mark. Who, in the previous week or two, had gathered all those pieces of broken crockery and arranged them on top of a foundation stone? And why? A thumping heart notwithstanding, these wrecked and dead places were other people's grief, not mine. Sadness over a destroyed building of no immediate personal connection was not the savage force which has drawn so many others back on more personal journeys to nothing.

The contributors in a sense chose themselves. Every conversation or interview seemed to conclude with a suggestion that I should visit a friend who had suffered a similar bereavement in another town, suburb or country. Each demolished home I stood before could have been one of thousands, each town site could have been one of hundreds, each destroyed suburb could have been one of dozens. Most countries in the world are lands of forced exile to somebody now living in Australia. My study of Darwin after the cyclone could have been a

study of Newcastle after the earthquake. It should not reduce the intensity of the emotions quivering in this book to reflect that they are paralleled in the minds of probably hundreds of thousands of Australians.

The emotions expressed to me were raw, and so is the book. Except in the case of the inundation of Lake Pedder, I have not attempted to set such recollections into the current context of memory or place theory. Possibly these many accounts will be the quarry of further theorisation of oral history and belonging; they may widen our current understanding of the phenomenon of grief and loss. Indeed many questions proceed from these stories. Is there a maximum level of grief which the human psyche allows itself to sustain? Can an ethical analogy be drawn between a bushfire victim's loss of home and a Holocaust survivor's loss of extended family, birthland and the national culture? Are people who own their homes likely to love them more than those who rent them? Is class difference relevant to place studies? Is forced evacuation a necessary condition of grief for a lost place? Do residents of farms love their places more than residents of suburbs? Do children remember places differently from adults? How and why do place memories change at different phases of life? Are women likely to mourn lost places more readily than men? While there are many implied responses in the text, there are no definitive answers. I have left the hundred or so people whose stories are represented in this book largely to speak their own intuitive truths in the poetic and open-ended terms in which they were rendered to me. With place and memory theory I have no quarrel, and have often entered the debate myself in other contexts.[7] But not here, not among such raw and intimate memories, not about these dead places. If this book demonstrates the complexity and depth of feelings for lost places in Australia, its mission will be accomplished.

There is another looming theme about which I have also added little. Each of the individuals and groups represented here have been left to mourn their lost places alone. While developers may have wanted to destroy a town or neighbourhood, they were not emotionally attached to those places and generally do not now contest their memorialising. Those who have embarked on the long journey to nothing at least found nobody standing at the same dead site to challenge the legitimacy of their grief.

In modern Australia, and still more elsewhere in the world, such uncontested attachment is becoming a luxury. On the left bank of the Jordan, in South Africa, Bosnia, Hungary, Uganda, Hong Kong and Cuba, dozens of cultural, ethnic and familial rivals, mostly deprived of their places of attachment, dispute not only physical possession but others' rights of emotional attachments to the same place. We know well that Australians dispute the expansion of suburb over farmland and new houses over old, but we don't so know so well—because such matters are private—that people nurse their own personal and different memories, attachments and griefs. Occasionally these shared but conflicting emotional attachments become public.

In this book I have confined my discussion of emotionally contested places to Namadgi National Park in the Australian Capital Territory. At Namadgi, environmentalists and former pastoralists do not dispute the right to be there, for the environmentalists are firmly in control; the pastoralists seek the right to be remembered and celebrated at the exact location of their achievements. Related to this deepening theme, of course, are separate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal emotional and spiritual attachments to the same places. Some New Zealand farmers have argued before the Waitangi Tribunal that they, not the Maori claimants, are the true inheritors of the high country, for they have loved it and cherished it for nearly 200 years. Australian farmers are beginning to advance their own sets of valued memories, attachments and histories over the same areas claimed by Aboriginal people. Having worked for many years among Aborigines deprived of their country, and more recently with non-Aborigines deprived of theirs, I am filled with anxiety at the complexity of such disputed attachments. They await a second study, which will follow this book.

For the rip, as Dorothy Hewett put it, will not stop flowing. Our relationships to our own lost places grow more insistent, yet in many Asian cities no building is allowed to remain standing for more than perhaps twelve years. Famous Australian buildings can disappear almost overnight. Whole suburbs vanish before freeway constructions in a matter of weeks.

Philip Hodgins' poem ends:

> I used to walk along
> the rabbit tracks and check my snares
> at places round the billabong.

But now they keep the rabbits down
with bait. It's hard to come this far
and find a lot of things have gone,

that all the snares have been undone
and what I wanted isn't here.
These places round the billabong
are like a lot of things, they're gone.

Each of us has our own remembered billabong which is not the same as once it was. The emotions which emerge from these stories are frightening in their intensity. Let us not underestimate the effect which the loss of dead and dying places has on our own self-identity, mental well-being and sense of belonging.

Peter Read

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