

## **'Raising high its thousand forked tongues': Campfires, Bushfires, and Portable Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century Australia**

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The bushfire spectacularly exemplifies the Australian environment's apparent hostility as it was, and continues to be, perceived by settler society. Victorian migrants to Australia were encouraged to consider their new home as a type of bucolic haven, with an idealized landscape similar to that of Britain. The reality that confronted them was quite different, and many struggled with the strangeness of the world around them. Still, settlers attempted to recreate the place they had left behind and, on a superficial level, they appeared to experience some success. The rapid rise of industrial-scale farming saw the pastoralization of the land: trees were cleared to make way for grazing herds and, in theory at least, the fenced fields that replaced the scrubland resembled the green pastures of old England.<sup>1</sup> In reality, of course, the grass was green for very little of the year and deforestation compounded the climatic challenges that troubled the settler farmer. Those attempting to manage the land struggled with regular droughts, which made the transposition of European farming techniques problematic, and many new arrivals were dismayed at the parched ground, along with its propensity to burn at the hottest times of the year.

European settlers experienced many difficulties as they sought to reassemble their lives in a new hemisphere. For many, the extreme heat, unfamiliar vegetation, and arid ground became markers of their distance from home. As I have argued elsewhere, the bushfire was an extreme reminder for migrants of how radically their lives had altered.<sup>2</sup> In the early stages of colonization, fires were viewed as one-off catastrophes, unrepeat-

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<sup>1</sup> Farming in Australia became increasingly mechanized after 1870, both in terms of the cultivation of crops as well as the intensive farming of livestock. Late nineteenth-century innovations, including the development of refrigerated shipping, enabled both Australia and New Zealand to export meat to the other side of the world, with the first successful Australian shipment departing from Sydney in 1879. This resulted in the need for ever more grazing land with farms shifting from small-holdings into vast properties, containing tens of thousands of sheep. Philip Armstrong offers an overview of the expansion of the wool and meat trades in *Sheep* (London: Reaktion, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Grace Moore, 'Home Was Where the Hearth Is: Fire, Destruction, and Displacement in Nineteenth-Century Settler Narratives', *Antipodes*, 29 (2015), 29–42.

able freak events. Yet by the second half of the nineteenth century, the settler community had begun to understand that the bushfire was a seasonal phenomenon with which they would have to learn to live.

Fire, however, was also an important aspect of domesticity. The lighting of a fire, whether in a domestic hearth or out in the wilderness, could signal an attempt to bring a little ‘homeliness’ to the bush, and fire lighting became an important gesture for new arrivals, as well as a practical means of keeping warm. In fact, the removal of trees from the land made it more fire-prone (particularly after ring-barking was introduced to Australia, as I shall discuss towards the end of this article), so that attempts to create a familiar landscape simply exacerbated the differences between the northern and southern hemispheres.<sup>3</sup> The settler community began an ongoing process of reconfiguring its relationship with fire, and in particular its understanding of the role of burning in the bush.

### Campfires and yearning

The campfire occupies a somewhat romantic place in Australian settler culture and in Antipodean ecology.<sup>4</sup> Fires have long been associated with storytelling as well as with warmth, and while narratives, including some of Henry Lawson’s ‘Camp-Fire Yarns’ (1885–1900), celebrate the ‘mateship’ fostered around the fire, they also elide its potential for danger and destruction. The environmental historian Tom Griffiths has noted that ‘fires are strangely historical. They inspire stories, disturb dreams and evoke memories’, and that this prompting of memory was important for those trying to weave aspects of their old lives into their new ones, thousands of miles from ‘home’.<sup>5</sup> Luis Fernández-Galiano carries this idea further in his study

<sup>3</sup> David Lindenmayer and others offer a detailed analysis of the change in Australia’s fire regimes and the prolonging of the wildfire season after 1788. See David Lindenmayer and others, *Woodlands: A Disappearing Landscape* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2005), pp. 48–57.

<sup>4</sup> Ecocritics including Freya Mathews and Deborah Bird Rose associate the campfire with the ‘mystique’ of the outback. See, for example, Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 109–10; and Deborah Bird Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 15, although both writers engage with campfires regularly in their work. For indigenous Australians, the conviviality of sitting round a campfire is as much about custodianship and connectedness to ‘country’ as it is about warmth and sociability. Jessica Weir outlines this ecological connectedness when she explains that ‘country’ (which is a deep-rooted nourishing of the land, characterized by a sense of belonging and spiritual connection) ‘can be one’s own campfire’. See Jessica K. Weir, ‘Country, Native Title and Ecology’, in *Country, Native Title and Ecology*, ed. by Jessica K. Weir, Aboriginal History Monograph, 23 (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012), pp. 1–20 (p. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Tom Griffiths, *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 183.

*Fire and Memory*, arguing that the combination of fire for warmth and fire for cooking creates a home, which to a nineteenth-century migrant would have been a very attractive idea.<sup>6</sup> According to this logic, the lighting of a campfire is an act of what Janet Myers calls ‘portable domesticity’, albeit a temporary one, which creates the warmth and camaraderie of the hearth out in the bush.<sup>7</sup> It is also an act that is fraught with the potential for danger. I therefore wish to examine representations of the campfire and its perceived role in drawing settlers closer to their new environment. Following Richard White’s argument that Australian national culture was founded in a ‘city-dweller’s image of the bush’, I shall examine the anxieties that settlers projected onto the uncanny landscape and the role played by the campfire in either exacerbating or diminishing their concerns.<sup>8</sup> I also consider how — and whether — the campfire was deployed to tame the environment and, interpreting the lighting of a campfire as an act of (attempted) domestication, I argue that it offered colonists an illusion of mastery over their surroundings — a dominance that was often both temporary and tenuous.

Campfires have long been associated with nostalgia. Gaston Bachelard has written of the dreaming and remembering which occur in front of the fire, connecting repose with ‘reverie’ and the recollection of a sense of well-being.<sup>9</sup> The lighting of a campfire seeks to replicate the sanctuary of the domestic hearth, to impose domesticity, order, or familiarity on a landscape that resists such attempts to tame it; and, as such, the act is loaded with tensions. While it may offer comfort to the weary traveller, a fire in the Australian wilderness means something very different from a fire in a forest in the northern hemisphere. As a result, the campfire is always surrounded by a frisson of danger and uncertainty at the same time as it is evocative and homely. On the other side of homeliness, there is always the possibility for the ‘unhomely’ or ‘*unheimlich*’: an intangible feeling of discomfort that settlers sought to drive away with their fires. This sensation is, one might argue, similar to the feelings settlers experienced in relation to the Australian bush, which frequently confounded their attempts to ‘tame’ it through the clearance of shrubs, and constantly reminded colonists of its strangeness.

According to the historian Bill Garner, the Australian colony began as a collection of tents, and many settlers identified with an image of themselves as intrepid pioneers with a deep-rooted connection to the land. Garner

<sup>6</sup> Luis Fernández-Galiano, *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy*, trans. by Gina Cariño (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Janet C. Myers, *Antipodal England: Emigration and Portable Domesticity in the Victorian Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688–1980* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. by Alan C. M. Ross (Boston: Beacon, 1964), p. 14.

argues that ‘the environmental circumstances of Australia [...] made campers of the English who came here, and camping out was a significant part of the process that eventually made them Australians’.<sup>10</sup> It is, then, hardly a surprise that the campfire quickly attained iconic status in Australian culture, to the extent that the publication of campfire songbooks, stories, and poems became big business from the 1850s onwards. Julia Bowes argues that the writing of the bush poets Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson works ‘to particularise the campfire experience to an Australian context’, citing the use of a specialized vernacular of ‘billies’, ‘swagmen’, and ‘billabongs’ to claim the campfire experience for the bush nationalist cause.<sup>11</sup> While Bowes argues that ‘the campfire was a site where national stories were told to the backdrop of the Australian bush’, many of these works had a fairly oblique connection to the campfire (p. 101). Sometimes the fire was invoked as a catalyst for a sequence of sketches of life in the bush, and often it was a plot device designed to appeal to metropolitan readers, who spent more time imagining the Australian countryside than inhabiting it. Nevertheless, the campfire in fiction and in fact was used as a place to tell stories about the countryside and its strangeness, mediating anxieties about exposure to the landscape and its hostilities in what appeared to be a safe space. The lighting of a fire was, in some ways, a point of continuity between the northern and southern hemispheres: an act of convergence and conviviality, also creating a space to remember past fires, on the other side of the world. Thus, while the campfire story often asserted the type of Australianness identified by Bowes, it was also tied to a longing for the north, which was exacerbated by the otherness of the Australian terrain.

While the campfire offered comfort, familiarity, and connections between north and south, it also became something different in an Australian context. Part of what makes a campfire both thrilling and slightly terrifying is its potential to cause devastation if it is not controlled properly. A 1961 campaign by the New South Wales Bush Fires Committee, which urged campers to ‘make fire your servant, not your master’, and reminded them to extinguish their fires, points directly to this danger.<sup>12</sup> This idea of settlers asserting mastery over fire goes back much further than the 1960s, however, and is more broadly problematic in relation to the renewal of the landscape and the natural role of fire in Australia’s ecosystem. We might, however,

<sup>10</sup> Bill Garner, ‘Land of Camps: The Ephemeral Settlement of Australia’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Melbourne, 2010), p. 11. See also, Bill Garner, *Born in a Tent: How Camping Makes Us Australian* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> This was part of an attempt to assert a uniquely Australian settler identity, which came increasingly to be tied to some of the land’s environmental challenges. See Julia Bowes, ‘Playing with Fire: The Place of Campfires in Nature Tourism’, in *Playing in the Bush: Recreation and National Parks in New South Wales*, ed. by Richard White and Caroline M. Ford (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), pp. 99–132 (p. 101).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Make Fire Your Servant, Not Your Master’ (Sydney: NSW Bushfire Committee, 1961).

regard the lighting, feeding, and subsequent extinguishing of a campfire as a staging of this attempted control. Bowes has commented:

The exercise of building a campfire gave Australians an opportunity to enact the national myth of man overcoming nature. In the same way that the pioneers overcame the harshness of the Australian landscape by developing survival skills and bushcraft, campers and bushwalkers often remarked on their triumphs over the dangers of fire as they harnessed and domesticated it to serve their own purposes. (p. 106)

As Bowes expresses it, domestication is roughly synonymous with Europeanization, suggesting that the campfire's comfort stems from its *apparent* containability. The building of a campfire re-enacts in miniature the pioneers' 'management' of the landscape, as well as their exploitation and abuse of it. The campfire is fed by the forest — not always responsibly — yet there is an art to building and maintaining it that Bowes identifies as 'bush craftsmanship' (p. 106). There is, though, something rather awkward about the idea of crafting the bush, in that it suggests a deliberate misshaping and refashioning that is both artificial and an attempt to impose European notions of order and safety upon it. It also, of course, fails to register that the process of pastoralizing the bush made it more fire-prone than it had been prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The vignette 'Memory's Influence', which appeared in Walter Dollman, Jr's *Bush Fancies and Campfire Yarns* (1898), neatly exemplifies the campfire's connection to memory and domesticity. It opens with a fictional vision of an untended fire, which, as I discuss towards the end of this article, can be a highly problematic situation in the Australian wilderness:

A campfire, on a calm night, at the time of year when the warmth of a fire comes welcome. It is not brightly blazing, as one might expect, but seems neglected, and is slowly whitening into ashes the sticks which have been heaped together earlier in the evening. Now and again a half-burnt stick falls into the ashes beneath it, and a few sparks fly and crackle, then all relapses into silence again. But if we look closer we may see a human form stretched upon a rude bed of blankets alongside the fire, and a human face apparently gazing intently into the smoldering pile.<sup>13</sup>

Dollman's narrator continues to describe that man as a 'shell' whose eyes look beyond the fire and into his past. We learn little of the man, other than that he is thousands of miles away from home. The fire, which has stimulated his reverie, causes him to recall his boyhood in an almost trance-like way. However, it also offers him a curious, mystical vision of his parents in

<sup>13</sup> Walter Dollman, Jr, *Bush Fancies and Campfire Yarns* (Adelaide: Lewis, 1898), p. 67.

the present, impelling him to move towards his old life, gravitating towards home and kinship. The unnamed man, a kind of unsettled settler, has not been successful in the colonies. His life has been one of ‘hard living and ill-fortune’, yet the dying fire (which is implicitly connected to his dying parents) brings about a ‘softening’ in his ‘hardened composure’ (Dollman, p. 68). This alignment of fire with memory draws on Victorian symbolic realist conventions which, Kylie Mirmohamadi and Susan Martin have argued, were frequently deployed by nineteenth-century settlers to interpret and understand the Antipodes.<sup>14</sup> The landscape here is dismissed very rapidly by Dollman as ‘desert drear’ (p. 69), something to be traversed on the way home, and nothing more — a trope deployed by many colonists. The makeshift, temporary fire exposes the makeshift temporariness of life in the south, pointing the way home through its evocation of the past. This piece shows the important role that campfires could play in channeling human emotions, providing continuity from one side of the world to another. Such evocations were not always smooth, however, given the distinctness of the Australian bush’s soundscape and its difference from the more contained forests of the northern hemisphere.

The danger behind the campfire is occasionally registered in its stories, as in J. C. F. Johnson’s *An Austral Christmas* (1889). Set at a cattle station in Queensland, the work comprises a sequence of campfire stories told by thirteen men — some of whom are former diggers from the goldfields — who take it in turns to tell tales around a campfire after they have finished their Christmas lunch. In one story, ‘Old Crab, the Growler’, set, as its narrator tells us, just six weeks before the devastating fires of Black Thursday (6 February 1851), a bushfire breaks out near the home of a former convict, Old Crab, who is known for his misanthropy.<sup>15</sup> Old Crab is hated by everyone around him, except for a 14-year-old boy, Fred Thorn, who loves him for reasons that never really become clear. There is no warning that the fire is coming, and when it is first sighted nobody takes any particular notice. It moves closer with great rapidity and the narrator takes pains to explain its swift-moving danger, emphasizing the forest’s highly flammable qualities and nature’s complicity in starting the fire:

<sup>14</sup> Kylie Mirmohamadi and Susan K. Martin, *Colonial Dickens: What Australians Made of the World’s Favourite Writer* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Black Thursday’ is the name given to the bushfires of 6 February 1851, in which more than a quarter of the state of Victoria (in the south-east of Australia) was destroyed by fire. While only twelve deaths were reported, it is likely that itinerant bush dwellers would not have been accounted for. Paul Collins notes that it is estimated that over one million sheep were killed in the fires, along with tens of thousands of cattle. See Paul Collins, *Burn: The Epic Story of Bushfire in Australia* (Carlton: Scribe, 2009), p. 74.



[A] fire in a stringybark forest is most to be feared in the bush, as (unlike a fire on the plains, amongst the grass only) it is next to impossible to stop it, or combat it any way. The blaze first catches the fibrous, ragged bark, mounts rapidly amongst the foliage, which, containing as it does so large a quantity of essential oil, soon ignites, and then, if the wind be at all strong, leaps from tree to tree, one vast sheet or roaring flame.<sup>16</sup>

The plot is fairly predictable, in that a horse breaks its neck, thwarting escape plans, and the eponymous cantankerous Old Crab sacrifices himself to save the young Fred, who has previously nursed him through an illness. Having bestowed his worldly goods on Fred, whose horse opportunely carries him away, even as he is expressing his reluctance to leave Old Crab, the reformed convict is presumably burned alive. The narrator draws a veil over the particularities of his death, simply commenting that ‘the smoke and flame parted them forever’ (p. 54). While the melodrama and sacrificial elements of this story are fascinating (self-sacrifice becomes an important trope in the fire stories of the late nineteenth century, as is exemplified by J. S. Borlase’s shocking 1885 short story, ‘Twelve Miles Broad’), what is interesting for the purposes of this article is the presence of a bushfire in a campfire tale. Implicitly, it points to the danger behind burning *anything* in the bush, reminding those who are listening (or reading) of the layers of fiction surrounding the Australian campfire, particularly in relation to ideas of safety. While the fire may ward off venomous creatures, it can also draw in strangers, not all of whom may be welcome and, most importantly, if it is not observed closely, the fire may burn out of control at any moment. The bushfire plot embedded within the campfire story reminds us that a lot can happen while waiting for the ‘billy’ to boil, as tragedy and comfort are awkwardly juxtaposed.

Ada Cambridge’s poem ‘By the Campfire’ (published under her married name in *The Australian Ladies’ Annual* in 1878) offers an exploration of the uncanny feelings that could be evoked by the bush. While the piece begins as an appreciation of Australian pastoral, with whispering gum trees and glimmering golden wattles, it quickly moves through clichéd European ways of framing the landscape, to become something much darker. Initially, the campfire draws creatures towards it: ‘an opossum flits before the fire light, — pauses, peers, — | I see a round ball where he sits, with pendant tail and pointed ears’.<sup>17</sup> For Cambridge, the campfire is a type of defence, as it was for many nineteenth-century settlers, both literally and figuratively. While it may attract the apparently tame, charmingly different bush creature, it provides an implicit deterrent against the wilder aspects of the bush. Cambridge writes of the ‘curlew’s thrilling scream’, which stirs

<sup>16</sup> J. C. F. Johnson, *An Austral Christmas* (Adelaide: Thomas, 1889), p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Mrs Cross [Ada Cambridge], ‘By the Campfire’, *The Australian Ladies’ Annual* (Melbourne: McCarron, Bird, 1878), pp. 70–72 (p. 71).

echoes through the mountain and is described as ‘the wildest bird note ever heard’ accentuating the horror reverberating through the darkness (p. 71). The ‘soft scratchings, up and down’ and ‘weird [...] undertones’ also point to possible danger encroaching on the campsite from the bush (p. 71). At the height of her unease and, significantly, at the midway point of the poem, the speaker tells us in heavily Gothicized terms:

The darkness gathered all around is full of rustlings strange  
and low;  
 The dead wood crackles on the ground, and shadowy shapes  
flit to and fro;  
 I think they are my own dim dreams, wandering amongst the  
woods and streams. (p. 71)

It is neither the bush nor its fauna that pose a threat to the poem’s speaker, but rather her own vivid imagination. The bush, then, is not the source of fear; instead, it is the settler who has projected her anxieties onto the environment, mediating the world around her through an Australian sublime that, Meaghan Morris, has noted, ‘displaces the often bloody human conflicts of colonial history with a pale metaphysics of landscape in which Man [*sic*] confronts the Unknown’.<sup>18</sup> The difficulty with this displacement is that it is incomplete, and the rustlings, cracklings, and shadows of the unfamiliar landscape and its fauna continually recall the suffering that is no longer visible, evoking an ineffable sense of guilt and unease.

Curiously, the poem’s tone then shifts radically and somehow the incredibly sinister ‘tangled trees [...] full of eyes — still eyes that watch me as I sit’, the ‘soft scratchings’, and the ‘sound of feet’ stealing ‘through the darkness’ mutate (p. 71). Instead of signalling the horror of the countryside closing in on the speaker, who opens the poem by speaking of mountains ‘enclasp[ing]’ her, the forest becomes empty and melancholy, leading to nostalgic recollections of England and a beloved who has been left behind. The reverie inspired by the combination of the fire and the landscape’s extreme otherness leads to a yearning for the north and the comfort of the familiar. Thus, nostalgia and longing become entangled with a desire to retreat or escape from the bush. Like Dollman’s vignette, Cambridge’s poem rejects the claustrophobia of a land that is larger than that which has been left behind, but which, paradoxically, also threatens to entrap and overwhelm the speaker. As the cultural critic Christina Thompson puts it, the Australian landscape was, for many migrants, a ‘nothing appalling and horrible [...] a nothingness which [was] actually something’ (quoted in Morris, p. 85), and that nothingness in turn became a space to which Europeans brought their guilty fears. Ada Cambridge is far from alone in this regard: other nineteenth-century writers like Barbara Baynton and

<sup>18</sup> Meaghan Morris, *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture* (London: Sage, 2006), p. 85.



Rosa Campbell Praed point to an intangible terror apparently emerging from, yet more probably projected onto, the bush. The historian Stephen J. Pyne takes these arguments a step further to think specifically about the affective role of fire for Australian settlers. As he expresses it, 'fire accentuated whatever emotions the bush elicited in an observer', noting that these feelings might entail 'a mix of horror, appreciation, and amusement'.<sup>19</sup> It is for this reason that, in addition to the stories and poems celebrating the campfire and the cosy reminders of home that it can offer, there is also a significant body of writing that considers the fire's dangers, moving beyond the uncanny to address outright terror.

Percy Clarke's *Three Diggers* (1889, but detailing events of the 1850s) also exemplifies the different levels of fear that settlers associated with fire. Technically, the novel is not a campfire story, although as it begins in the goldfields at Ballarat with three men sitting around a brushwood fire in front of a canvas tent, it is possible to make a case for reading it as such. The work follows three adventurers who have come to seek their fortune in the diggings and, towards the end of the story, they are caught up in an act of arson when some bushrangers set fire to the landscape. Here, Clarke offers a fantastically vivid description of the fire and its devastating force:

The fierce demon of fire, so useful a slave, so unruly a master, is truly in his element. He flings all his bonds and shackles aside, and with electrical speed he circles around massive tree-trunks, snapping up the twigs and the leathery resinous leaves as he climbs the highest gum, embracing each neighbouring tree in his fiery touch both aloft and aloft in the twinkling of an eye. See, as one speaks, the great branches flare up, redden, and crash down, while the trunk itself, half-eaten by the demon's savage and remorseless tooth, sways and falls, in hideous embrace bringing ruin around it.<sup>20</sup>

Clarke's explicit connection of two apparently disparate aspects of Australian settler life points to the layers of anxiety with which migrants approached the countryside and the levels of discomfort characterized by Ada Cambridge's poem. While Clarke's narrator equates the uncontrollable fire with a freed slave, to a nineteenth-century Australian reader the discarding of bonds and shackles would surely also have evoked thoughts of escaped convicts and their awkward, unnatural positioning in relation to both the landscape and settler culture. The alignment of convicts and fire points to something savage, possibly sublime, and definitely untameable in both, as well as signalling the guilt and neurosis that Morris reads

<sup>19</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia*, rev. edn (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), pp. 180–81.

<sup>20</sup> Percy Clarke, *Three Diggers: A Tale of the Australian Fifties* (Stroud: Nonsuch Classics, 2005), p. 227.

in European reactions to the environment. Both are something that settlers believed they could control and repress, yet both have the capacity to flare up and overwhelm.

### When fire escapes

Stephen Pyne has commented that Europeans in Australia had to learn that ‘fires could not be lit as casually as in Britain’, observing that ‘if the violent encounter with a bushfire was one side of discovery, the other was the endless record of campfires that escaped’ (p. 188). An escaping campfire could, given the tinder-dry grass, quickly become completely unmanageable, which might explain one aspect of the undercurrent of unease running through the works I have discussed above. For those still learning about the land, a campfire could be deadly, and there arose a number of nineteenth-century stories that responded to this possibility by showing how the bush campfire could transform from a source of comfort to one of danger.

One such chilling story was published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* in 1853. Appearing two years after Black Thursday, ‘The Burning Forest’ reveals a respect for fire and the swift devastation that it could cause in the bush. While many writers in the 1850s still regarded bushfires as freak events and tended to treat them as material for melodrama, the author of this story — who is identified only as ‘L. A.’ — shows an incisive understanding of how little control settlers had over fire. The story begins with a group of men — some new to the outback, while others know it well — trekking through the bush, en route to the gold diggings. Desperate for a drink of tea, a young man named Tom refuses to listen to his more experienced companion Lascelles, who warns him, ‘Tom, don’t make a fire — it’s hot enough to blister a salamander.’ Tom disregards his friend’s advice and, an hour later, refuses to extinguish the fire he has set, declaring, ‘Bother the bush, it is better burned. There’s plenty of it.’<sup>21</sup> Somewhat curiously, given his earlier concerns, Lascelles allows his friend to leave the fire smouldering, and the group continues on its way. This campfire is notable for its difference from the pleasantly domestic fires of the works by Dollman and Cambridge: it is left to burn out of contempt for the bush, and Tom’s comments reveal him to be a restless settler, alienated by his new surroundings.

The scene shifts to a migrants’ cottage, a little distance away from the campfire. While the inhabitants are clearly not wealthy, their life is presented as a domestic idyll: the wife has just made cakes and the polite,

<sup>21</sup> L. A., ‘The Burning Forest: A Sketch of Australian Bush Life’, *Illustrated Sydney News*, 22 October 1853, pp. 4–5 (p. 4). L. A. is the novelist and botanist Louisa Atkinson (1834–1872), who was known for her interest in bushfires and Australian ecology more generally.

dancing children are cheerful and clean. The eldest daughter, Minnie, sings Scottish airs as a reminder of the family's distance from home, yet their happy dwelling seems to point to the possibility of creating a home away from home in the bush, a notion that is reinforced by the references to the hills as the Scottish-sounding 'glen'.

Once more, the scene abruptly changes and now it is the dead of night, with the family fast asleep. A fire — which we infer has been caused by the log left alight by the men — rages through the glen and creeps up on the unsuspecting family, a brutal reminder of the climatic differences between Australian bush life and the home they left behind in Scotland. The author writes vividly of the fire's catastrophic path to the home and its unsuspecting inhabitants, along with its voracious appetite for the surrounding forest:

So soundly they slept that they heard not the uncertain roaring of fire coming on, nor saw its lurid gleam lighting up the humble roof of the little homestead. Onward the fire came, raising high its thousand forked tongues and devouring the forest trees. The ripe grain, sown with so much toil, and reaped with so much exultation, shot up yellow flames and fell in blackened ashes on the ground. (p. 4)

Here, we see not only the precariousness of setting up home in the bush, but also how carefully cultivated crops (and in other cases, livestock) could fall victim to the flames in a matter of moments. In this story, the author briefly offers hope of survival by showing the family's mother roused by her baby's coughing. The family evacuate their home in a careful, orderly fashion, in spite of the horror before them:

No loud shrieks rent the air, no wailing tones, but there were hurried steps, and pale terror-stricken faces [...]. Standing up to their knees in water, they uttered a silent prayer; while the little children are crying all around, and choking in the burning smoke. (p. 5)

Realizing that he must rescue his eldest son, who is minding sheep in the hills, the father departs and, while the reader is spared the harrowing details, the narrator remarks: 'He lived to find his son struggling with the devouring element, and trying to drive the frightened flock to a place of safety. Father, son, and sheep, perished together' (p. 5). Back at the homestead, his wife watches her children gradually overcome by smoke inhalation and she eventually dies herself, leaving only her adult daughter Minnie and her youngest son to struggle on (they are spared, but we learn nothing of their future, beyond the fact that they make it to a sheep station). While plots of this kind (in which either entire families are wiped out by fire, or husbands and wives are parted) became very common later in the century,

this type of story was unusual in 1853, when bushfire narratives were much more likely to showcase settler heroics and to result in triumphant rescue.<sup>22</sup> L. A.'s story shows remarkable insight into the dangers of human-lit fires in the bush. It captures the monstrosity of a bushfire and the terror it could instil within the settler community, while also showing the rapid damage that could be caused by settlers who wilfully misunderstood Australia's very different fire ecology.<sup>23</sup>

Kate Rigby provides a very helpful long history of what she terms European pyrophobia, noting that the burning of landscapes, or 'free-burning', had fallen into abeyance in Northern Europe during the Enlightenment, which led to the belief that fire could be domesticated or controlled. As Rigby expresses it, 'over the course of the eighteenth century, free-burning fire became associated with itinerancy, backwardness, and social unrest. Fire belonged in the hearth, not on the ground.'<sup>24</sup> Europe's damp climate also meant that it was not particularly fire-prone, which added to the sense that this burning was an obsolete and 'primitive' land management technique. In short, settlers did not understand how fire worked in the Antipodes, although, as Paul Collins notes, they were not afraid to use it to clear the bush (p. 66).

It is Tom's lack of 'pyrophobia', or at least his failure to feel a healthy respect for fire, that causes the catastrophe of 'The Burning Forest'. His stubborn refusal to understand the consequences of his actions goes unpunished, however, to the extent that he may not even be aware of the devastation he has caused, which it is tempting to read retrospectively as a type of analogue for settler activities in the Australian wilderness. As the story's narrator comments at the conclusion to the piece:

Taking place far from all civilisation, these circumstances did not reach the newspapers, and perhaps the travellers never knew the result of that burning log. 'Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth.' The lighted match, or pipe ashes, in a dry country, are sufficient to fire a forest, sending desolation and death to peaceful homes. And once ignited, where shall be the end? (p. 5)

<sup>22</sup> Stories from the end of the century, like 'Kathleen's' 'The Interrupted Wedding: In Death Not Divided', *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 5 February 1887, p. 31; or H. Furze's 'United in Death', *Australian Journal*, November 1898, pp. 724–25, signalled a shift away from the 'rescue' narrative to a more resigned acceptance of the devastation a fire could cause.

<sup>23</sup> See Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2011) for a detailed discussion of indigenous fire regimes and their sensitivity to the seasonal rhythms of the land.

<sup>24</sup> Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 115.

The narrator here emphasizes the gravity of Tom's actions through his citation from James 3:5, taking the incendiary metaphor (which is usually interpreted as a warning against the power of the tongue to spread gossip) at face value, so that it becomes a censure against carelessness in the bush. The ominous tone here also draws attention to the vulnerability of the bush-dwelling family, who may fall victim to the 'devouring element' (p. 5) and lose their lives without anyone even registering the incident. That an entire family might die in a bushfire, completely unnoticed, emphasizes in turn the enormity of the bush and its vast difference from the (comparatively) small European forests. Human life seems to lose its significance in the face of the flames, as vast areas of forest are consumed.

L. A.'s story is prescient in the connections it makes between the campfire and the bushfire, while at the same time drawing attention to the vulnerability of the bush dweller. The work also anticipates the horrific fire stories of the final decades of the nineteenth century by bringing together settler unease at the possibility of incendiary terror in the bush, and a growing fear of its consequences. A contribution to the *Melbourne Argus*, 'The Bush Fire', which appeared a few weeks after Black Thursday, similarly shows how fire could stealthily creep up on sleepers. The poem is by Charles Harpur and eventually formed part of his collection, *The Bushrangers* (1853).<sup>25</sup> Its protagonist, Egremont, goes to sleep on his sheep station and is gradually awoken by the noise of a fire:

When with the dreams of Egremont, a strange  
And momentarily approaching roar began  
To mingle and insinuate through them more  
And more of its own import, till a Fire  
Huge as the world was their sole theme: and then  
He started from his sleep to find the type  
A warning! for what else however terrible,  
Might breathe with a vitality so fierce  
As that which reigned without? (p. 72)

The language of this poem may be a little histrionic to the modern ear, yet Harpur captures superbly the fire's stealthy approach, and its immensity. Egremont's half-conscious dream of a fire 'huge as the world' encapsulates the enormity of a bushfire as seen through the eyes of a settler from the northern hemisphere, where the size and trajectory of most fires was less spectacular. As the poem unfolds, the fire becomes increasingly wild and unmanageable to the extent that it is almost apocalyptic in its magnitude:

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Harpur, 'The Bush Fire', *Melbourne Argus*, 31 March 1851, p. 4; Charles Harpur, *The Bushrangers: A Play in Five Acts, and Other Poems* (Sydney: Piddington, 1853), pp. 72–75. All quotations are from the 1853 edition.





Fig. 1: William Strutt, *Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851*, 1864, oil on canvas. Image reproduced by kind permission of the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

Within the circling forest he beheld  
 A vast and billowy belt of writhing fire,  
 That shed a wild and lurid splendour up  
 Against the whitening dawn, come raging on!  
 Raging and roaring as with ten thousand tongues  
 That prophesied destruction. On it came,  
 A dreadful apparition — such as Fear  
 Conceives when dreaming of the front of hell! (p. 73)

Visions of hell are invoked regularly in representations of bushfires, many of which draw (some knowingly, others less so) on Dante's *Inferno* for inspiration. William Strutt's painting *Black Thursday* (1864) (Fig. 1) brilliantly conveys the enormity of a bushfire, along with its all-consuming inescapability.<sup>26</sup> In Harpur's piece, it is the *noise* of the fire that is most arresting, the repetition of the word 'raging' emphasizes the overpowering roar of the flames. The cacophony, combined with the demonic prophecy of destruction, makes this vision one of fear and dread.

As the fire becomes ever larger, Harpur represents it in increasingly anthropomorphic terms, imagining it as a voraciously hungry animal or demon, devouring the landscape. While bushfire demons were later to be considered in benign terms by the children's author J. M. Whitfeld,

<sup>26</sup> Strutt's painting may draw on Piero di Cosimo's *A Forest Fire* (c. 1505) for its inspiration, but unlike its original, the smoke and flames take over the canvas in Strutt's work, where there is no space for blue sky, only smoke, flames, and the chaos of people and animals attempting to flee. As John Schauble points out, representing fire in Australia is very different from depicting northern hemisphere burning. See John Schauble, 'Beyond Our Normal Field of Vision: The Impact of Art on Community Bushfire Understandings' <[http://www.proceedings.com.au/tassiefire/papers\\_pdf/thurs\\_schauble.pdf](http://www.proceedings.com.au/tassiefire/papers_pdf/thurs_schauble.pdf)> [accessed 23 May 2018].





Fig. 2: G. W. Lambert, 'Oh, How the Spirit of the Bush Fire Loved It', J. M. Whitfeld, *The Spirit of the Bush Fire Series, Part 1* (Sydney: Brooks, 1898), p. 5.

whose *Spirit of the Bush Fire* (1898) was illustrated by G. W. Lambert (*Fig. 2*), Harpur's demon is nothing short of terrifying in its appetite for destruction. That the fire can be embodied in this way points to a sense of its malicious agency. This scene is not simply 'nature red in tooth and claw' for Harpur, but rather a deliberate act of persecution, which highlights the unease of the colonists' relations with the land:

Thitherward  
The perilled people now were hurrying all,  
While in their front, beneath the ridge, a dense  
Extent of brushwood into which the Fire's  
Bright teeth were eating hungrily, still brought  
The danger nearer! Shall they reach that hill  
Unscathed, their only refuge? Well they speed  
Past the red-rushing peril? Onward yet! (p. 73)

The poem (which is eleven stanzas in length) continues in the same melodramatic tone, at one point alarming the reader with the sound of a cry, which turns out to be the anguished screams of a steed that has taken shelter from the flames, demonstrating that this is not just a human catastrophe. Yet interlaced with the sensational account of the Egremont family's flight is a section devoted to a critique of the land management that has compounded the crisis:

All grouped  
In safety now upon that hill's bare top —  
Egremont and his household looked abroad,  
Astonished at the terrors of the time!  
Soon sunk their rooftree in the fiery surge;  
Which entering next a high-grassed bottom, thick  
With bark-ringed trees all standing bleak and leafless,  
Tenfold more terrible in its ravage grew,  
Upclimbing to their very tops! As when  
Upon some day of national festival,  
From the tall spars of the ship-crowded port  
Innumerable flags in one direction all  
Tongue outward, writhing in the wind: even so,  
From those dry boles where still the dead bark clings  
And from their multifarious mass above  
Of leafless boughs, myriads of flaming tongues  
Lick upward, or aloft in narrowing flakes  
Stream out, — and thence upon the tortured blast  
Bicker and flap in one inconstant blaze! (p. 74)

This surprising interjection is important for its recognition of settler culpability. The vision of the 'bleak and leafless' ring-barked trees is a particularly loaded one, as discussions were ongoing about this controversial

practice. Ringbarking, which was introduced to Australia by James Fenton, a pastoralist who moved from Ireland to Tasmania, and which involves cutting away a ring of bark around the circumference of a tree's trunk, was used by settlers from the 1840s onwards as an efficient means of deforestation. Anthony Trollope weighed in on the subject in his travelogue *Australia and New Zealand* (1873) and again in his Australian novella *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* (1874), taking the opportunity to declare his opposition. As the historian Tim Bonyhady has noted, 'ringbarking transformed the colonial landscape' by enabling the large-scale destruction of trees and thus making the land increasingly susceptible to fire.<sup>27</sup> That Harpur should take the opportunity in his dramatic poem to highlight the additional destruction caused by ringbarking demonstrates his awareness of the impact that this technique was having upon the environment and, in particular, its connection to wildfire.<sup>28</sup>

Harpur's poem, as it was published in the newspaper, did not dwell on Egremont's fate, with the character fading into insignificance in the face of the fire — a form of closure that is very different from the conventional campfire tale which, ordinarily, seeks to assert warmth and safety. We learn, almost in an aside, that Egremont and his family are 'grouped | In safety' on the top of a hill, but when set against the vastness of the fire, and the many birds and animals it has killed and displaced, the poem shifts from a conventional realist focus on character to a broader concern with the bush itself. The final section contains another appraisal of the European migrant's detrimental effect on the countryside, this time associating the

<sup>27</sup> Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000), p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Harpur adds a detailed note to the poem to be sure that his readers understand the gravity of his critique. The note is worth quoting in full for the intensity of emotion with which its author conveys his disdain for the changes wrought upon the land:

'A "strip of clearing" is a strip of land, on which the timber has been felled and burned off, but which is not yet enclosed or cultivated; and "bark-ringed trees" are trees from which a portion of the bark has been chipped away all round for the purpose of killing them as they stand, with the further view of burning them up by the roots when sufficiently decayed, in order to rid the land of them totally and at once. By felling them instead, the Settler must either incur the subsequent expense and trouble of "stumping," or submit to the constant eyesore which a field, with the stumps remaining in it must inevitably present to his "bump of order" — that is, if he have it in any degree of fulness.

The descriptive detail of the text may appear overcharged to all those persons who have only witnessed such Bush Fires as occur on our ordinary commons; but in the earlier Colonial times, before the wilderness, generally, was so thickly stocked with cattle as even the remotest locations are at present, our natural grasses often attained to the height of five or six feet, and several kinds of spear grass (or grass trees) even to double that height' (*The Bushrangers*, p. 75).



pallor of the burning trees with that of the white settlers who are complicit in their destruction:

Mighty sapless gums  
Amid their living kindred, stood all fire —  
Boles, branches, all! — like flaming ghosts of trees,  
Come from the past within the whiteman's pale  
To typify a doom. (p. 75)

Harpur's poem brings together fear of both fire and the bush, while at the same time confronting settler culpability. By figuring the trees as ghosts, he conveys the colonists' injurious effect upon the wilderness, perhaps also signalling the cause of the unease that hovers over the campfire tale: night-time in the bush. While the settlers see a vengeful fire demon, Harpur shows that the destructive force is of their own making, making it all the more confronting.

Ringbarking and the felling of healthy trees are, in Harpur's poem, directly responsible for the burning bush. This disharmony with the landscape reveals that some settlers were conscious that their asset-stripping approach to Australia as a land of resources to be plundered was endangering those who viewed themselves as 'improvers'. While the bushfire is frequently figured simply as a demonic enemy, greedily devouring land and livestock, Paul Collins has argued that it took on a much greater meaning:

It was a destructively frightening force, uncontrollable and unpredictable. In European consciousness it came to represent the inscrutable nature of Australia, its alien otherness. It was a terrible threat because wildfires were overwhelming and settlers were bluntly reminded that they lived in a fragile and vulnerable relationship with the most fire-prone place on earth. (p. 75)

The bushfire, then, came to embody the terror that settlers felt in relation to the land, but also in relation to themselves and their impact on Australia's ecology. The fire was anthropomorphized because, deep down, the settlers knew themselves to be the demons who had stolen land, taken lives (both human and non-human), and greedily reached for more. It is small wonder that one of the most terrifying figures to emerge from the bush in stories of the period was a stranger, wielding a tinderbox or matches, reminding readers that while not all wildfires were arson, the majority were caused by humans in one way or another.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Danielle Clode notes that before humans arrived in Australia, lightning was the sole cause of fire. Today, causes of bushfire include illegal burn-offs, children playing with matches, cigarettes, and arson. According to Clode's statistics, 10 per cent of bushfires are caused by campfires. See Danielle Clode, *A Future in Flames*

The campfire and the stories surrounding it played an important part in mediating settler anxieties about the difference and hostility of the Australian environment. The small, carefully built fire in the woods was a place to tell stories as a means of allaying fears. Some of those anxieties were inspired by bushfires, and the fact that tales of massive blazes were told around a smaller fire might have simultaneously evoked a sense of danger and one of containment. While some settlers, like Ada Cambridge's poetic persona, were able to identify themselves as the *source* of the horror in the bush, others invoked the campfire as a means of allaying the most confronting aspects of migrant culture. The fact that, for Europeans, fires have traditionally prompted nostalgia and reverie adds a layer of complexity to the fire's apparent security. If the lighting of a campfire is an act of portable domesticity, then it is a fleeting one that signals the many challenges settlers faced in seeking to assert a permanent presence on the land they had stolen. Furthermore, it is an act that is laden with memories, personal and collective, pleasant and horrific, and a melancholy that for many was associated with their settlement in the makeshift world of the bush. In an Australian context, the campfire itself became a type of fiction: a story that settlers told themselves about their ability to control and fight fire. It is for this reason that benign late nineteenth-century campfire stories like those by Dollman sit alongside the more horrific visions of L. A. and Harpur. Pyne succinctly encapsulates the potential for tragedy that lurks behind any fire when he comments that 'one man's controlled fire became a neighbor's wildfire' (p. 334), perhaps explaining why campfires never completely drove away the sense of the uncanny that settlers experienced in the bush. These stories are representative of the paradoxical futility and necessity of attempting to domesticate the wilderness, while behaving as though fire too can be 'tamed'. As such, they offer a fascinating reminder of the strangeness of the Australian environment, and the tenacity with which settlers faced the extraordinary challenges of turning it into a home.

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(Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2010), pp. 123–29. Both Borlase (in 'Twelve Miles Broad') and Trollope (in *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*) explore the figure of the arsonist, who starts a fire out of malice.