

# *Lost in the Flames? The Missing Great Australian Bushfire Novel*

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**F**IRE, A DEFINING FEATURE OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY, might have been expected to produce a great storyteller. It has not, as yet, which is curious given that bushfire is arguably the quintessential Australian disaster, pivotal to the national psyche and looming large in the community imagination. Bushfires tend to be sudden impact, sudden death events. The orange-red flames provide a visual element that is absent from murky, swirling brown floodwaters or the parched dust of the backcountry drought. Especially in the television era, the drama of bushfire has been played out countless times in the nation's living rooms, in part because of its sheer spectacle.

Bushfire, however, remains largely absent from the nation's fictional narrative. While fire finds expression in the visual arts, poetry, and particularly children's literature, bushfire novels aimed at an adult audience remain rare. Even cataclysmic events such as Black Friday in 1939, Ash Wednesday in 1983, and Black Saturday in 2009—while triggering a flurry of journalistic and poetic activity—largely failed to ignite the imagination of fiction writers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Five great conflagrations in modern Australian history have claimed many lives, destroyed homes and towns, and blackened millions of hectares of public and private land. The Black Friday fires in the state of Victoria in January 1939 killed 71 people and destroyed more than 1,300 homes and almost 4,000 other structures. The fires razed entire towns, some never to be rebuilt. On February 7, 1967, fires in and around Hobart killed 62 people and destroyed around 1,300 homes. On February 16, 1983, the Ash Wednesday fires burned in both Victoria and South Australia, killing 75 people. They blackened more than 500,000 hectares and destroyed 3,700 buildings, leaving more than 2,500 homeless. Stock losses were huge, including 340,000 sheep and 18,000 cattle. The Black Saturday Victorian bushfires on February 7, 2009, killed more people than any other bushfire disaster in Australia's history, taking 173 lives, destroying around 2,000 homes, and burning more than 450,000 hectares. In 2019–20, vast fires covering 10.5 million hectares (25.9 million acres) along the Australian east coast killed 33 people and destroyed more than 3,500 homes in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. For a brief summary of Australia's fire history and fire losses, see: Inspector-General for Emergency Management, *Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season, Phase One, Report*, (Melbourne, Victoria: State of Victoria, 2021), 55–58. See also Stephen Pyne, *Burning Bush*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1991), passim.

In the nineteenth century, art was an influential framework through which European settlers learned about and took away meanings from fire in the landscape. Children's literature—particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century—defined for a generation many of the beliefs, and perpetuated at least some of the myths, about how bushfires begin and behave.

Bushfire has more generally become impressed into Australian popular culture, and this in turn has helped to shape the manner in which non-Aboriginal Australians respond to fire in the landscape. Collective bushfire knowledge and understandings have found many expressions over the past two centuries. These include the traditional mass media, film, photography, television, literature, art, popular culture, and more recently social media. The news media is arguably the most influential of these in shaping community perceptions and understanding of bushfires and other disasters.

Representations of bushfire in these forms make up a significant aspect of those understandings. On closer examination, however, it appears that the centrality of bushfire to the Australian landscape and the lives of its inhabitants is broadly less evident in the nation's output of cultural expressions than one might assume. Until relatively recently, even the history of bushfire has largely failed to capture the attention or imagination of domestic scholars. The best general account of fire in the Australian landscape arguably remains one written by an American (Stephen Pyne's *Burning Bush*).<sup>2</sup>

Given the relatively high profile of the bushfire in Australia's juvenile literature, it is curious that its presence in adult fiction is so slight. The comparison is justified particularly in terms of modern fiction. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bushfire was much more an incidental staple of the Australian novel. Just as bushfire became a marker of "Australianness" in juvenile literature during the 1960s and 1970s, a century earlier it served much the same function in adult novels. Perhaps in fictional terms, the bushfire had simply burned itself out as subject matter before the mid-twentieth century. However, the episodic nature of fire has consistently lent itself as a subject for short story writers, from nationalists like Henry Lawson (1867–1922) to contemporary authors such as Robert Drewe (b. 1943).

Australian novels featuring bushfires do, however, encompass all forms of the genre, from more highbrow literary endeavours to pulp fiction. Crime novels and romance fiction are also represented. But in quantum after more than two centuries of European settlement, the number of "bushfire novels" remains extremely modest. Indeed, bushfire has a far greater representation in poetry. Perhaps poets are better able to capture the ephemeral nature of fire. It may be that fire itself, while a useful backdrop in fiction, is simply more difficult to translate into prose.

With rare exceptions, fires played an episodic part of the "landscape novels" popular in the mid-nineteenth to late nineteenth century. These novels depicted life in Australia, often for the benefit of a British or American readership, rather than a domestic one. They showed life in the

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Pyne, *Burning Bush*, *ibid.* Since 2009, a small number of Australian academic historians have addressed the subject of bushfire. Bill Gammage revisited the Aboriginal stewardship of the Australian continent, including through the use of fire: Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2011). Danielle Clode wrote a more general environmental history of fire: Danielle Clode, *A Future in Flames* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010). Tom Griffiths—one of the few historians with an ongoing interest in fire—has published more widely on the subject: Tom Griffiths, "We Have Still Not Lived Long Enough," *Inside Story*, February 16, 2009, <https://insidestory.org.au/we-have-still-not-lived-long-enough/>; Christine Hansen and Tom Griffiths, *Living with Fire: People, Nature, and History in Steels Creek* (Collingwood, Australia: CSIRO Publishing, 2012).

bush with all its dangers, including the threats posed by “blacks,” flood, fire, and drought. Many were romance novels, both in plot and vision, rarely informed by a deep understanding of the landscape. Some were written by traveling authors—such as Ellen Clacy (1830–1901)—or as reminiscences by colonists—Charles Rowcroft (1798–1856), for example—who had remained for a few years before returning “home” to England.

These early novels set the tone for community understandings of bushfire in the Australian landscape. Rarely was this early storytelling other than one of tragedy and disaster, tempered with tales of heroism. There were the occasional depictions of fire being used as a tool in the landscape by both Aboriginal peoples and settlers: by the former to drive out game and by the latter as a quick and cheap way of land clearing. Emerging from these early depictions were some examples of beliefs as to how settlers should respond to wildfire when it threatened.

Bushfire was firmly implanted in the colonial imagination by the mid-nineteenth century. The first recorded use of the term was in 1832 in the *Sydney Monitor* newspaper.<sup>3</sup> The novella *The Cabramatta Store: A Tale of the Bush* (1850) by Englishwoman Mary Theresa Vidal (1815–73) is considered the earliest fictional account of bushfire in Australia. However, an earlier novel by Rowcroft, *Tales of the Colonies* published in 1843, interestingly contains an account of Aboriginals firing the landscape to drive out game.<sup>4</sup> Vidal’s story tells of an immigrant couple trying to make a go of life in the colonies out along the Parramatta Road from Sydney. Bushfires—and bushrangers—intrude into their lives. The local schoolteacher speculates that the fires might have been started by “the blacks forgetting to put out their fires,”<sup>5</sup> but most simply blame the heat of summer itself. Here was early recognition of the power of fire in the landscape, a force that had already become largely alien in Europe: “The bush was on fire on each side of the road, and here and there the fence was caught. The tall trees were some of them red hot to the top, the fire seemed to run apace, and every leaf and stack was so dry there was nothing to impede its progress.”<sup>6</sup>

A brief, highly romantic, fictionalized episode using the 1851 Black Thursday fire in Victoria appears in *Lights and Shadows of Australian Life* (1854) by Ellen Clacy (1830–1901), a diarist who visited the Victorian gold diggings in 1852–53. The passage describes a couple surviving a bushfire by galloping on horseback to the safety of a ploughed paddock,<sup>7</sup> a strategy identical to that adopted by a pair of firefighters at Kinglake in Victoria on Black Saturday 2009, only this time in a small vehicle. Yet fire remains little more than an episodic backdrop to the wider narrative of these novels. In a sense, it is a form of environmental exotica used by expatriate writers to illustrate the vast difference between life in the colonies and at home in Britain.

An early Australian-born novelist who incorporated fire into her work was Louisa Atkinson (1834–72). The theme of bushfire recurs in her fiction, beginning with the salutary tale “The Burning Forest.” This short story was published in the *Illustrated Sydney News* in 1853 at the height of the gold rushes when many newcomers were flooding into the bush. It is possibly the first example of “fire awareness literature.” Despite being warned of the dangers of starting a bushfire, one traveler lights a fire to boil a billy (water pot) to make tea. Warned again when he abandons the fire as they continue on their way, he declares, “Bother the bush, it is better burned. There is

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Moore, ed., *The Australian National Dictionary: Australian Words and Their Origins*, 2nd edition (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2016), 293.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Rowcroft, *Tales of the Colonies* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1843).

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Francis Vidal, *Cabramatta and Woodleigh Farm* (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1850), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Vidal, *Cabramatta and Woodleigh Farm*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Clacy, *Lights and Shadows of Australian Life* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1854), 165–85.

plenty of it . . .”<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, a bushfire starts, spreads, and burns to death all but two members of a family who flee their slab hut: “Father, son, and sheep, perished together. . . . Down in the dell, the mother retreated farther and farther into the pond, shielding, with her dress, the children from the burning leaves showered upon them, and trying to pray, and to move her parched lips to tell them ‘all would be well.’”<sup>9</sup> One by one, the children drown, and finally the mother “laid her weary head beside theirs.” Only the eldest daughter, Minnie, and the baby survive, when Minnie springs through the flames to safety. The story ends with the salutary warning: “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?”<sup>10</sup>

Fire features in three other of Atkinson’s novels, *Gertrude the Emigrant: A Tale of Colonial Life* (1857); *Debatable Ground, or, the Carlillawarra Claimants* (1861); and *Tressa’s Resolve* (1872). In *Gertrude*, the bronzed hero advises the heroine, “If the fire catches the wheat, take out the horses, let Nanny have Benbow, and do you and Mrs. Doherty mount the other two which I have saddled already, ride to the road leading to Rocky Creek. . . . Mark the lowest line of the fire, dash through; you must wrap wet blankets round you, don’t fear, and then gallop across the black burnt ground: there is no danger there, only from falling trees, get down to the long swamp, and stay in the water.”<sup>11</sup> Much in this advice still rings true in terms of bushfire survival. Certainly, “heading for the black” (burnt ground) is a well-defined and practiced survival tactic, but this is one of the earliest examples of fiction being used in a didactic fashion. Fire was part of a new colonial reality in an environment that was, in many respects, completely alien to the European vision. The idea of a landscape on fire, either through accident or deliberate act, was far removed from the lives of most of the early European settlers. By the time of imperial expansion, fire had been thoroughly domesticated in the European landscape. European settlers sought to impose the same monological power relationship upon the colonial landscape. As with much of its environmental endowment, Europe has largely tamed fire, subjecting it “to the discipline of the garden, to subordinate it to the order of society.”<sup>12</sup>

By this time, bushfire was an essential part of the Australian landscape novel. In 1871, the well-known English novelist Anthony Trollope (1815–82) embarked upon a yearlong visit to Australia. He spent part of that time staying with his son on a sheep station in central western New South Wales. While his son’s venture in squatting ultimately failed, it did spawn—at least indirectly—the shortest of Trollope’s forty-seven novels. *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* (1874) first appeared in serial form in the *Age* between November 1873 and January 1874 and was published as a book in October 1874. It is the curious tale of Harry Heathcote, a young squatter modeled on Trollope’s much-loved son. The story follows the conventions of the Christmas tale genre—reconciliation, peace, and goodwill to man—but not before arsonists threaten Gangoil station by attempting to burn out the Heathcote family in the sweltering Christmas heat.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Clarke, *Pioneer Writer: The Life of Louisa Atkinson, Novelist, Journalist, Naturalist*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 81–2.

<sup>9</sup> *Illustrated Sydney News*, October 22, 1853, quoted in Clarke, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Louisa Atkinson, *Gertrude the Emigrant: A Tale of Colonial Life* (1857; repr., Canberra, Australia: Australian Scholarly Editions Centre, 1998), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Pyne, *Vestal Fire: An Environmental History Told through Fire of Europe and Europe’s Encounter with the World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 20. See also Victor Crittenden, *Louisa Atkinson and Her Novels* (Canberra, Australia: Mulini Press, 1997), 44–45.

The colonial pastoral scene was an ambitious topic for Trollope to tackle on the basis of his short visit. It traverses such broad topics as the relationship between squatters and free selectors and the emerging bush ethos, and not always successfully. Trollope was also rather cavalier with his interpretation of geography, bushcraft, and the Australian idiom. Indeed, the *Age* serialization was openly criticized by the rival *Herald* as “utter rot,” while *Melbourne Punch* lampooned it in a two-part parody entitled *Harry Hartshorn of Tinfoil* by Anthony Dollup.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that Trollope fixed upon bushfire as the natural disaster that could effectively wipe out a pastoral holding (his own son’s enterprise eventually succumbed to drought). Trollope even envisaged the use of fire in deliberate and malicious fashion against a rival landowner. His description of bushfire in the landscape is certainly not without merit, relating how it was fought with the rough boughs stripped from gum trees and depicting the calculated use of back-burning to starve an encroaching fire front of fuel.

Trollope also clearly had a sense of the extent of fire in the Australian landscape, if none whatsoever of its history: “It was said, indeed, that there existed no evidence of fires in the bush until men had come with their flocks; but then there had been no smoking, no boiling of pots, no camping out, till men had come—and no matches.”<sup>14</sup> Here is a wholly Eurocentric view of the Australian colonies as terra nullius, without even faint acknowledgment of an Aboriginal past, let alone an indigenous fire history. And while *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* might be derided on a number of levels, its use of bushfire as its central plot device sets it apart. It was indeed one of the first novels set in Australia to do so. Meanwhile, other nineteenth-century authors studded their works with fires. Henry Kingsley (1830–76) has his hero in *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859) flee on horseback in the face of a crown fire.<sup>15</sup> The short story writer Mary Gaunt (1861–1942) peppered her tales of colonial life with bushfires.<sup>16</sup> One reviewer of *A Fiery Ordeal* (1897), the posthumously published final novel of Victorian author Tasma (Jessie Catherine Couvreur) (1848–97), quipped that “Australian novelists always have bush fires in reserve to burn up every trace of an inconvenient husband.”<sup>17</sup> The writings of the nationalist period also feature bushfire. Lawson’s poems and stories (*The Fire at Ross’s Farm*, *The Bush Fire*) are sprinkled with references to fire, as is the work of Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis) (1868–1935). Bushfire is one of the tribulations of the bush, helping to build the imagery of the landscape and, arguably, the national character. As such, fire becomes a defining characteristic of Australianness at a time when the colonies were debating whether they should federate into a single nation (albeit firmly within the realm of the British Empire). The idea of what it meant to be an Australian during the nationalist period would become the stuff of debate among historians in the latter half of the twentieth century. At the same time, Australian children’s authors would begin using bushfire in a similar fashion to define a new reality in which the stories of childhood were no longer simply tales transplanted from Britain.

Despite the severity of fires around the turn of the twentieth century in southeastern Australia, there is precious little fiction with a bushfire focus from this period. By the time of the Great War, there were other preoccupations. It was almost as if bushfire disappeared from the

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* (1874; repr., London: The Trollope Society, 1998), x.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Kingsley, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859; repr., Melbourne, Australia: E. W. Cole, [1896?]), 184–85.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Gaunt, *Life at Deadman’s: Stories of Colonial Victoria* by Mary Gaunt, ed. Bronwen Hickman (Hoppers Crossing, Australia: Hat Box Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Clarke, *Tasma: The Life of Jessie Couvreur* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 155.

landscape—or perhaps received a degree of resigned acceptance within it—at least until the 1920s. Fires, of course, continued to burn throughout the war, although Paul Collins speculates that there were fewer males around to light them for the duration. After the war, the advent of soldier settlement schemes, under which the government granted returned servicemen rural allotments, led to an upsurge in fire activity.<sup>18</sup> This is the environment in which *The Emigrant* (1928) is set.

*The Emigrant* tells the story of a young Scot who, having come under the influence of communists in Glasgow, is expelled from his homeland and voyages to Australia. He teams up with a young Australian engineer met on the long sea voyage, and eventually they take to the road as vagabonds in Gippsland. The climactic scene involves a great bushfire in the hills around the township of Noojee. Written by Frederick Howard (1904–84)—journalist, author, and sometime editor of the Melbourne *Herald*—the novel falls back on the conventional descriptors of fire, becoming infused with outrage at the immoral “destruction” of the landscape, or at least the landscape that the settlers had tamed. The hero, his betrothed, and her father find shelter under blankets in a creek: “On the hill slopes was a horrid saturnalia: a hundred thousand outlines of trees caught in a death agony tapped by a phantom army of flames, that leapt and danced in a mad orgy about them. The red rape of Nature and the holocaust of Evil.”<sup>19</sup>

Fire is seen in terms of its threat to the labors and achievements of the settlers, rather than a natural element in the landscape. The conversion of the “back country” into economically profitable farmland around the turn of the century, the establishment of closer settlement, and the bringing of European—more specifically British—order are recurrent themes. Bushfire is something that is not so far removed from many Australian families, who in this era still had close links to the bush. People related more closely to the scene being described. Indeed, at this time just under half of Australia’s population still lived in rural areas or provincial towns, compared with around 10 percent a century later.<sup>20</sup>

John Ewers (1904–78) returns to these themes in the pioneering saga *Fire on the Wind* (1935) set in South Gippsland at the end of the nineteenth century. Ewers was a prominent Western Australian writer, and this was his second novel. Tales told to him by relatives who farmed in the area and survived the vast 1898 Gippsland bushfires provided much of the context of the story. Again, fire becomes the climactic device of the story: “In the city of Melbourne the shops lit their lights at noon on that day in midsummer. There the smoke was less dense, but the sky was black and tinged towards the east in a baleful red glow. Red Wednesday!”<sup>21</sup>

Curiously, the very years in which bushfires wrought perhaps the greatest havoc upon the Australian landscape were not marked by accompanying fictional accounts. The 1930s and 1940s saw fires of ferocity and cost, in terms of both human life and property losses, that were not matched until the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Yet no novelist saw in the Black Friday fires of January 1939 in Victoria—which claimed seventy-one lives, burned through 10 percent of the state’s land area, and obliterated entire towns—a story worthy of retelling.<sup>22</sup> Novelists likewise

<sup>18</sup> Paul Collins, *Burn: The Epic Story of Bushfire in Australia*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne, Australia: Scribe Publications, 2009), 93.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Howard, *The Emigrant* (London: Longmans, Green, 1928), 321.

<sup>20</sup> J. Powell, *An Historical Geography of Modern Australia: The Restive Fringe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> John Ewers, *Fire on the Wind* (London: Hodder and Staughton, 1935), 317.

<sup>22</sup> Pyne, *Burning Bush*, 309–14. Interestingly, Judge Leonard Stretton (1893–1967), who led the Royal Commission’s inquiry into the 1939 bushfires, set a particularly high literary benchmark in relation to this

ignored the fires of the 1940s in Gippsland and on the outskirts of Melbourne. Of course, other greater social upheavals, such as depression and another world war, were consuming the attention of writers around this time. But it was also an era of transition in Australia, of increasing urbanization and a shift from a predominantly rural-focused economy to one in which urban-based manufacturing was becoming more important.<sup>23</sup> The shift in rural populations to the city was also complete by around this time, and with this came reflections, sometimes nostalgic and even romantic, upon the rural Australian milieu that had once been but which was fast disappearing.

*The Tree of Man* (1955) by Patrick White (1912–90) is an epic novel tracing the generational lives of the Parker family in rural Australia. The framework of the novel, the first to bring White to widespread international attention, is that of a conventional pioneering saga, “but above all it enacts the psychological drama of Stan [Parker]’s desire to understand the purposes of God, which ‘are made clear to some old women, and nuns and idiots,’” notes one critic.<sup>24</sup> As in many Australian pastoral novels, bushfire is one element, part of a larger panorama of trial and tribulation of life in the bush. This approach further helped present bushfire as something essentially alien to the lives of most urban-dwelling Australians. Bushfire had already become by the 1950s something that happened “out there” in the bush. Although White was a city dweller for much of his life, he had worked as a jackaroo, or sheep station hand, as a young man. With his partner, White lived on a tiny six-acre farm at Castle Hill, on the outskirts of Sydney, for nearly two decades after World War II. In 1952, with much of the Blue Mountains ablaze, they witnessed the impact of bushfires at close quarters.

White’s account of fire recites some of the commonly held myths and misconceptions about what to do and what may happen in such an event. There is an account of a snake biting itself to avoid being burned to death. In another passage, White even reiterates a potentially lethal survival strategy: “Some said they would jump inside the water tanks with what cash they had from the vegetables or the pigs.”<sup>25</sup> Conversely, *The Red Bull* (1959) by H. A. Lindsay (1900–69) is one of the rare Australian novels to address bushfire as its central theme.<sup>26</sup> Lindsay was a noted Australian bushman and author of a popular bushcraft book (*The Bushman’s Handbook* in 1948), which had its genesis in his work educating Australian soldiers in survival techniques during World War II. He

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event. Stretton was noted for “his literary skills, moral vision and political audacity.” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, s.v. “Stretton, Leonard Edward Bishop (1893–1967)” by Tom Griffiths, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stretton-leonard-edward-bishop-11793/text21097>. His report on the 1939 fires is still held up as one of the finest pieces of judicial writing in Australian history. “Rarely can an official document have conveyed raw emotion so effectively or portrayed what it is to live in the bush in southern Australia in summer,” wrote *Age* journalist Tom Duggan in 1983. “In parts, the slow measured language comes close to poetry, the introduction too being a minor literary tour de force.” Eric Hewitt, *Judges through the Years* (Carlton, Australia: Hyland House, 1984). Excerpts were for many years set as a senior secondary school text in the state of Victoria.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Murray, *The Confident Years: Australia in the Twenties* (Melbourne, Australia: Allen Lane, 1978), 197; C. C. Bolton, “1939–51,” in *A New History of Australia*, ed. Frank Crowley (Melbourne, Australia: William Heinemann, 1974), 458.

<sup>24</sup> Karin Hansson, “Patrick White: Existential Explorer,” August 29, 2001, [www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/white-article.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1973/white-article.html).

<sup>25</sup> Patrick White, *The Tree of Man* (1956; repr., Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973). Using water tanks as a place of refuge during a fire has led to a number of reported deaths, as recently as 2009. Aside from the water heating to a point at which anyone in it will expire, tanks elevated on stands risk collapsing. H. A. Lindsay, *The Red Bull* (London: Robert Hale, 1959).

<sup>26</sup> H. A. Lindsay, *The Red Bull* (London: Robert Hale, 1959).

was also the author of several novels and other works. The title of his bushfire novel is a variation on the once popular expression “the red steer,” which was used in the early part of the twentieth century for an out-of-control bushfire, usually deliberately lit (as in “letting the red steer out of the paddock”). “Red bull” is also used but less commonly,<sup>27</sup> as is “red mare.”<sup>28</sup> In a 1945 short story, Alan Marshall (1902–1984) employed a variation in the form of “wild red horses.”<sup>29</sup>

Lindsay’s book is interesting on a number of levels, if not of particularly great literary merit. It portrays an Australia in which the landscape is primarily regarded as a resource to be exploited. It is a landscape in which fire is an integral but essentially negative phenomenon, yet one that can ultimately be overcome by human intervention. It also reflects some of the social structure of Australian society at that time. Men of influence make things happen with a telephone call. Small holding farmers are essential, almost definitive Australians. Life in the bush is preferable—and somehow more worthwhile—to life in the city. Women’s work is to support their men, although the central character, a woman, challenges that orthodoxy.

The natural environment is considered ripe for alteration, through mining and through conversion to farmland and forestry. *The Red Bull* draws for much of its sentiment upon Lindsay’s own experience as a bush worker, farmer, and commercial beekeeper during the 1920s and 1930s. The central theme of the book is that the fire-rich Australian bush could be altered and the threat to human settlement lessened by replanting the “economically useless Australian scrub” with “valuable” American and European species such as hickories and oaks.<sup>30</sup> This management of the bush would also protect the forests from a running fire. It was a vision that persisted into the 1970s, evidenced by the existence of experimental arboretums in which introduced forest species were planted in copses to test the viability of broadscale plantations and for bushfire protection.<sup>31</sup>

Stephen Pyne characterizes the process of reforestation, with some irony, as “a marvellous vision, the ultimate triumph of agriculture and the moral order of the yeoman farmer.”<sup>32</sup> Farming would absorb forestry as it did herding. Instead of the native bush devastating the exotic flora by fire, the exotics would redeem the degraded Australian bush by abolishing fire. This had been the history of much of Western Europe, and it was the chimera accepted by most European foresters for Australia.<sup>33</sup> In reality, it was softwoods, not hardwoods, that eventually became the favored plantation timber in Australia. Instead of hickories came radiata pine—neither fire resistant nor a blessing to the Australian environment. Meanwhile, the resource value and public view of native timber altered dramatically within the space of a few decades. Forestry, Pyne noted, could not abolish fire.<sup>34</sup>

*With Hooves of Brass* (1961) by Robert Close (1903–95) offers a vastly different vision of both the bush and fire.<sup>35</sup> Close was a controversial figure in Australian literary history, having the rare distinction of being jailed for obscene libel over an earlier novel, *Love Me Sailor* (1945). By

<sup>27</sup> Roger Vaughan Carr, *Firestorm!* (London: Puffin Books, 1989), 53.

<sup>28</sup> Sidney J. Baker, *The Australian Language* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1945), 90.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Marshall, “Wild Red Horses” in *Southern Stories, Poems, and Paintings* (West Melbourne, Australia: Dolphin Publications, 1945), 18–28.

<sup>30</sup> Lindsay, *Red Bull*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> The R. J. Hamer Arboretum in Olinda, Victoria, is one example of this.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Pyne, *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), 157.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Robert Close, *With Hooves of Brass* (London: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1961).

the time *With Hooves of Brass* was published in 1961, he had already been living in self-imposed exile in Europe for over a decade. Nevertheless, Close continued to set his writing in Australia, although why he chose a mill settlement in Gippland's Strzelecki Ranges as the backdrop for this work is something of a mystery. Looming throughout a tale of stultified passions and coarse bush life is the threat of fire, which provides the novel's denouement. Close, a onetime merchant seaman, is usually associated with novels of the sea, but his descriptions of both bush life in the 1950s and of fire itself are reasonable given his limited experience of both.<sup>36</sup> There are, however, occasionally alarming suggestions that betray ignorance. The most significant is the mill boss directing the women and children in the settlement to seek shelter on a huge sawdust heap if the fire burns into the settlement. It was precisely in such circumstances that a number of mill workers died in the 1939 fires.<sup>37</sup> Close's description of the fire and its aftermath is raw, at times almost lurid in detail, but credible nonetheless.

Curiously, at the very time when bushfire features widely in juvenile literature, it largely disappears from the landscape of the Australian novel—and remains absent for a couple of decades. Bushfire becomes an occasional plot device, adding either incidental color or heightening fictional drama. A 1986 novel by Bill Green (1940–2011), *Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing*, resuscitates fire in fiction. This is the self-narrated tale of a sixteen-year-old boy holidaying in the 1950s with his parents at a coastal resort on Victoria's Great Ocean Road. It is a story about awakening adolescent sexuality, rebellion, anger, and a deeply troubled ex-serviceman farmer who attempts to burn down the town in a fit of retribution. Fire is central to both the story and the subtext of this sometimes bleak and ultimately violent book. It becomes both the backdrop to the story and the metaphor for much of the deeper psychological drama. Here, also, are descriptions of fire that go beyond the clichéd and more conventional ones commonly found in much Australian fiction: "Inside the smoke the light gradually filtered through enough to give the texture, but not the taste of medium fog. Small flickering flames appeared like torches in a regular line. Greedy little fires were eating at fence posts where wire had once been threaded . . . There was something indecent about such insidious flickerings—like ants attacking helpless, soft-bellied creatures."<sup>38</sup> Even so, Green falls back upon the well-worn device of rendering fire as a living, breathing creature: "The fire could only feed on the dry grass to the north and, like a determined animal, was doing so under difficult conditions. It was ripping away using the wind as bellows."<sup>39</sup> There is a graphic description of two families burned to death after they left their cars and were overrun by the fire.<sup>40</sup>

Surprisingly, the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, despite a flurry of children's books, generated little adult fiction. This was despite the fact that these were easily the most devastating fires in terms of loss of life and property in southeast Australia since 1939. These fires found literary expression in other forms—factual accounts, local histories, a handful of short stories, and especially poetry—but no novels. Why this is the case is difficult to fathom. This was a period during which a resurgent Australian film industry was trading on parochial Australian themes and characters for local and international audiences (among the features were *Gallipoli* [dir. Peter Weir, 1981], *The Man from Snowy River* [dir. George Miller, 1982], *We of the Never Never* [dir. Igor Auzins, 1982], and *Crocodile Dundee*

<sup>36</sup> Robert Close, *Of Salt and Earth: An Autobiography* (West Melbourne, Australia: Nelson, 1977).

<sup>37</sup> L. E. B. Stretton, *Report of the Royal Commission to Enquire into the Causes and Measures Taken to Prevent the Bushfires of January, 1939, and to Protect Life and Property* (Melbourne, Australia: Government Printer, 1939), 5.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Green, *Freud and the Nazis Go Surfing* (Sydney: Pan Books, 1986), 146.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 147, 154–55.

[dir. Peter Faiman, 1986). Yet, as they had after the 1939 fires, Australian novelists eschewed this great conflagration with all its drama, pathos, loss, and challenge as suitable material for the longer literary form. Perhaps the absence of fire from the nation's narrative reflected how far Australians had become removed from the natural environment physically, emotionally, and intellectually by the latter part of the twentieth century. The bush was no longer central to being Australian, except in a romanticized way, in a country where 85 percent of people were urban dwellers.

The 1990s, however, saw fire on the doorsteps of suburban Australians. In 1967, Hobart endured a devastating fire burning into suburban streets. In the 1990s, it was Sydney's turn, with major fires on the edge of the nation's largest city. *Smoke* (1996), a novel by journalist Deirdre Macken (b. 1956), was prompted in part by those outbreaks. The story centers on the imagined settlement of Flint Bay, an isolated community set on the edge of a national park to the city's north. Occupied by a small community of retirees and weekenders, it is largely inaccessible and directly in the path of a bushfire. Macken raises the issue of Aboriginal fire practices: "No wonder middens and rock carvings were the only surviving witnesses to Aboriginal life pre-settlement. Fires wiped everything else out. Eventually and inevitably, everything in the Australian bush was wiped out by fire."<sup>41</sup> Her descriptions of the bushfire prop up an otherwise fairly ill-defined storyline. But *Smoke* reflects some of the more modern debates about bushfire and its place in the Australian environment. There is discussion of prescribed burning and hints that land managers around Sydney might not have done as much as needed in recent years. The issue of evacuation becomes central. People accept as the norm the notion that the authorities will provide a solution and give direction on this issue, a phenomenon that Danielle Clode notes in her contribution to this special issue of *Occasion*. Yet there is also challenge. At least some of the residents of Flint Bay see it as their right and responsibility to protect the settlement and their homes from the encroaching fire, rather than merely wait for "the authorities" to take charge and do the fire-fighting for them. Indeed, there is almost an element of defiance in the self-sufficiency the Flint Bay residents seek to achieve, despite overwhelming odds.

The conclusion to the novel is curious. The state emergency services minister announces that the military will coordinate and conduct future disaster-related activities, such as fighting bushfires. Aside from the unlikely political prospect of a state ceding such power to a federal agency, the implication again is that citizens are incapable of formulating, organizing, and managing their own responses to natural disasters. Not surprisingly, there is some demurral from the independent-minded people of Flint Bay.

The turn of the new century brought new, bigger fires and different dimensions to both the management of fire in the Australian landscape and its depiction. Environmental management, climate change, drought, the growing connection between a fire-prone landscape and where people choose to live, and some large bushfires in southeast Australia—all these issues were starting to challenge the bushfire orthodoxies and change the nature of the debate around fire. In *Four Fires* (2001), the popular novelist Bryce Courtenay (1933–2012) picked up on some of these concerns, turning his attention to bushfire in a family saga of more than one thousand pages. The story weaves the four fires of passion, religion, warfare, and bushfire through the lives of a family that lives in the small, fictitious rural town of Yankalillie in northeast Victoria throughout several decades of the twentieth century. Courtenay has another take on the "red steer," characterizing it as the "fireballs" witnessed during extreme fire behavior, "a phenomenon that old-timers

<sup>41</sup> Deirdre Macken, *Smoke* (Kew, Australia: Mandarin, 1996), 66, 139.

sometimes talk about, tall stories you think of as old men's dreaming."<sup>42</sup> Of more interest is Courtenay's characterization of the social dimensions of a local Country Fire Authority brigade and divisions between the landed graziers and the rest of the community, the gradual professionalization of organized firefighting, and the significance of these groups in rural Australia. These undercurrents remain significant in the public discourse around fire management in Australia, a contest between rural dwellers who believe they know about fire from actually engaging in firefighting and those who draw on a more scientific and structured approach.

A more cautionary tale is *Drown Them in the Sea* (2004) by Nicholas Angel (b. 1978). A back-burn gone horribly wrong on an outback property threatens to engulf the farm, forcing the central character into a life-and-death struggle for survival when he seeks refuge in a drying river. This he posits as a viable survival strategy, remembering tales of others who had perished by jumping into a bath or a rainwater tank only to be broiled alive.<sup>43</sup> Fire, an ever-present threat in the landscape, provides a dramatic conclusion to a novel about the struggle to remain on the land, to eke out a living in marginal farming country while staring down despair in the form of drought, bank managers, and other challenges.

Almost inevitably, given the region's long fire history, a bushfire provides a dramatic ending for *The Garden Book* (2005), a novel by Brian Castro (b. 1950) set in the Dandenong Ranges, forty kilometers from Melbourne and now forming an eastern boundary to the city's suburban sprawl.<sup>44</sup> This story occurs in the interwar years, centering on an Australian of Chinese descent. This is a tale about loneliness, addiction, and love. The environment is a backdrop that looms above the characters like the tall mountain ash forests that envelop them. But it is neither central to nor determinative of the story. The main character dies in the fire, becoming lost in smoke and driving her car over an embankment. Her child survives, barely, after hiding under a tank stand surrounded by exotic foliage. In *Vertigo* (2008), by Amanda Lohrey (b. 1947), set on the south coast of New South Wales, fire is more central to the denouement.<sup>45</sup> While there is a sense of fear at the impending disaster that the fire may bring, there is also a clearer understanding of its place in the landscape and of the idea that out of fire comes renewal and rebirth.

As I noted earlier, bushfire has been marginally more at home in short fiction since the nineteenth century. The short story form was particularly favored in Australian literature from the 1890s until the 1950s. Yet just as novelists largely eschewed bushfire, short story writers have proven similarly reticent. Lawson—considered a “founding father” of the short story form—and other nationalist writers including Rudd and A. B. “Banjo” Paterson (1864–1941) turned to fire but not to a point at which it really helped define their interpretations of the bush. In the twentieth century, bushfire in short fiction would become an increasingly more sophisticated element in the storytelling. However, there are few examples in which fire itself is central to the story.

One exception is in the work of John Morrison (1904–98), an English-born writer who spent much of his life living and working in the suburbs and hills around Melbourne. Morrison's stories are convincing in part because he bases them on his own experiences but also because he is a master of the genre. “North Wind” (1947) describes a bushfire in suburban Beaumaris, much more rural in 1944, from which the fundamental understandings about how houses burn

<sup>42</sup> Bryce Courtenay, *Four Fires* (Camberwell, Australia: Penguin, 2001), 34.

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Angel, *Drown Them in the Sea* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2004), 147.

<sup>44</sup> Brian Castro, *The Garden Book* (Artarmon, Australia: Giramondo Publishing, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> Amanda Lohrey, *Vertigo: A Novella* (Carlton, Australia: Black Inc., 2008).

in bushfires were learned. Two of his other bushfire stories (“The Children” [1950] and “Bushfire” [1963]) are set in the Dandenong Ranges. The ranges remain, however, one of the most bushfire prone areas in Australia. It is not so much the descriptions of fire itself that are important in these stories but the depiction of the impact of such events upon individuals and communities.<sup>46</sup>

Other authors whose work has incorporated bushfire in this form with considerable effect include Lawson (“The Bush Fire,” 1910), C. J. Dennis (“The Coward,” 1912), Gaunt (“The Doctor’s Drive,” 1915), Brian James (John Tierney) (“The Big Burn,” 1957), Drewe (“Radiant Heat,” 1989), Beverley Farmer (“Fire and Flood,” 1985), Margaret Scott (“Bushfire,” 2000), and Kate Grenville (“Bushfire,” 2001).<sup>47</sup> The wide sweep of the fiction genres in which authors employ bushfire as either a central backdrop or a climactic device suggests the universality of its attraction. It also suggests that a wide reading public is likely to receive to a range of messages, both accurate and ill-conceived, contained in different forms of novels and short fiction. What it fails to explain is the relatively modest number of novels, in particular, that have adopted bushfire as a theme. This absence has certainly not been the case with the depiction of bushfire in other cultural forms.

In the years after the single most calamitous bushfire event in Australia’s history—Black Saturday in 2009—few significant fictional accounts have been spawned (a possible exception is Eliza Henry-Jones’s trauma novel *Ache*, which appeared in 2017<sup>48</sup>). The event inspired two excellent reflective accounts,<sup>49</sup> as well as some juvenile literature. It may yet inspire a novelist, but the absence of such fictionalized narratives in the past suggests that writers will continue to avoid a full-on engagement with such a harrowing subject.<sup>50</sup>

The years since 2009 have, of course, been punctuated by yet more bushfires, as Australia grapples with a new climate reality. In just one bushfire season, between September 2019 and March 2020, vast swathes of eastern Australia were consumed by fire. Thirty-three people died and thousands of properties were destroyed in a landscape blackened across six states and territories amid apocalyptic scenes. Perhaps the kernel of a great novel lies in this most recent ash bed, waiting to germinate. A

<sup>46</sup> John Morrison, “The Children,” in *Twenty-three Stories* (Sydney: Australasian Book Society, 1962), 76–80; John Morrison, “North Wind,” in *North Wind* (Ringwood, Australia: Penguin, 1982), 143–83; John Morrison, “Bushfire,” in *This Freedom* (Ringwood, Australia: Penguin, 1985), 158–69.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Lawson, “The Bush Fire,” in *The Prose Works of Henry Lawson* (Sydney: Home Entertainment Library, 1935), 1: 342–50; C. J. Dennis, “The Coward,” *The Lone Hand* 11, no. 2 (1912): 71–77; Mary Gaunt, “The Doctor’s Drive,” in *Life at Deadman’s: Stories of Colonial Victoria by Mary Gaunt*, ed. Bronwen Hickman (Hoppers Crossing, Australia: Hat Box Press, 2001), 67–75; Brian James, “The Big Burn” in *The Big Burn* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), 164–72; Robert Drewe, “Radiant Heat,” in *The Bay of Contented Men* (Sydney: Picador, 1989), 12–32; Beverley Farmer, “Fire and Flood,” in *Home Time* (Ringwood, Australia: Penguin, 1985), 103–24; Margaret Scott, “Bushfire,” in *Changing Countries* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000); Kate Grenville, “Bushfire,” *Harvard Review* 30, (2006): 60–63.

<sup>48</sup> Eliza Henry-Jones, *Ache* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2017).

<sup>49</sup> Adrian Hyland, *Kinglake-350* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2011); Robert Kenny, *Gardens of Fire: An Investigative Memoir* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> I discount here Miles Franklin Award-winning crime novel *Truth* (2009) by Peter Temple (1946–2018), in which the fires form part of the backdrop. Henry-Jones’s *Ache* is mostly concerned with the aftermath of the fires and issues of lingering trauma.