Fresh Blood, Old Wounds: Tasmania and Guns

ONE MAN SHOT AND KILLED thirty-five people at Port Arthur in Tasmania on Sunday, 28 April 1996.

First news of this grisly event came to me, a Tasmanian, in Melbourne as I was watching the arts programme on ABC television. By the convention reserved for very bad or very good news, or for Tattslotto results, a strip of words ran across the bottom of the screen every few minutes, repeating the brief facts of the massacre, gradually adding to the number of corpses. If the name 'Port Arthur' had not been there; if there had been the name of some other place, some other state, some other country, the news would have been horrifying, shocking, wounding. But for Australians, and perhaps for Tasmanians in particular, the very name of Port Arthur chills, and it resonates evil; the place is saturated with a dark and purgatorial past. Even before any details were available, the thought of the murders themselves, coupled with their occurrence at Port Arthur in 1996, stirred in my heart and soul a deep dread which gripped me with a terror akin to the emotions felt during a recurring nightmare. My blood was chilled, but I was not entirely surprised. Many of the ugly chapters of Australia's past have been effectively erased, but torture, suffering, cruelty and death have always clung to the name 'Port Arthur'.

If that is the case, an innocent stranger might ask, how was it that so many people were visiting Port Arthur that Sunday? Do people go there as people visit, for instance, Dachau? Do people come to pay their respects to the dead of the distant past and to wonder at the human capacity for evil, suffering and courage? To remember? To be sure the true past is not forgotten? Not really. Port Arthur today is a kind of theme park where tourists go to forget and to enjoy. That is really why it was worth a killer's while, because innocent visitors were gathered there, eating, drinking, enjoying the weather and the view, prepared to shudder on the 'ghost walk', take pictures of each other outside the penitentiary, to buy post cards and cheap souvenirs.

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I do not believe there is any real connection between the historic horrors of Port Arthur and the killings on 28 April; I think there is of course a striking conjunction of inhumanity, a dreadful coincidence, a running together of past and present crimes. All over the 'civilized' world, acts of similar violence and bloodshed erupt in sleepy hamlets, shopping malls, universties, skyscrapers—anywhere that takes a gunman's fancy. However there is a poetic and thematic link between the events of 1996 and the events of last century that will forever cause the blood of the modern massacre to run back into the past, bringing events of the past momentarily to the fore, and etching the horrors of the present in indelible images.

Tasmania, formerly Van Diemen's Land, is a small island about the size of Ireland or Sri Lanka at the south eastern tip of the continent of Australia.

It's shape, some say, is like a heart; others call it a cunt. It is, in any case, the butt of many an Australian joke, known in legend for incest, bestiality, birth defects and freaks. I recently saw a report of a young Tasmanian woman who has a thriving business making and selling two-headed Tasmanian dolls. The most violent and unrestrained prisoners in the penal settlement at Port Jackson on the Australian mainland were transferred to Van Diemen's Land in 1803. The commander was John Bowen who was only twenty-three, and he pitched the first camp in the colony on the banks of the Derwent River at Risdon. Risdon is now the site of the Hobart jail where the man accused of shooting the thirty-five people is being held. Eventually, in 1830, Port Arthur was established as a prison settlement with thirty-four prisoners and fifteen soldiers. This company arrived by sea, as the place was then inaccessible by land. The ocean is treacherous, and tall cliffs of dark stone, marked by vertical breaks to resemble monstrous organ pipes, provide the first grim sight of Port Arthur.

I saw those cliffs from a boat when I was a child. I was with my father and uncle and cousins, and we were fishing for barracuda. It was cold , rough and misty, and I remember feeling very, very small and lonely and sad, out on the water, beneath the cliffs.

Last century, convicts constructed solid, handsome buildings from golden sandstone, and the remains of these, some of them in ruins, stand today. They stand in tranquillity among green lawns and soft foliage; roses ramble over crumbling walls. In 1893, forty years after transportation of British prisoners to Van Diemen's Land had stopped, and the island's shameful name had been re-written as 'Tasmania', the Tasmanian Tourist Association was formed. The aim was to advertise Tasmania as a health resort and pleasure island, and by 1912, 40,000 visitors were coming to Tasmania each year to see the beautiful rivers, mountains, forests and beaches. The buildings at Port Arthur

were sold and converted into residences, hotels, council chambers, but a public demand to retain the historic penal character of the place persisted, and a curious sensitivity and ambivalence about the past evolved. On the one hand there was an urge to wipe out the shame and evil; on the other there was a desire to sentimentalize, to trivialize, to give, for example, a cafe the name 'Broad Arrow' in joking reference to the brand on the convicts' clothing. The Minister for Education ordered convict records to be burnt in 1914; and yet visitors to Port Arthur could not resist taking romantic pictures of the prison walls.

By 1996 Port Arthur was a highly developed tourist facility sixty kilometres by road from Hobart, with all the comforts of a modern theme park in a most beautiful sea-side setting, spiced by the frisson of the convict past.

Enter, the gunman.

This word 'gunman' is actually quite old, from 1624. A lawless man who uses fire-arms. Whenever I see 'gunman' used in the press, it looks so blunt, so correct, so very much up to the minute that I think it must be a modern, made-up word, but it isn't. Perhaps we use it more often than we used to. It certainly fits the mood of the times. Lone gunman.

In the Broad Arrow Cafe a young, blonde, lone gunman took a military assault rifle from his large tennis bag and shot and killed twenty people. He had two assault rifles, the kind of guns that blow off limbs, blow large sections of people away. He left the cafe and killed four people in the car park. He drove to the toll gate and shot a woman and her small daughter. Her other daughter he hunted down, and he shot her where she was hiding, behind a gum tree. He shot four people in a car, took the car and drove to a gas station where he killed a woman and took a man hostage. He drove to a guesthouse where he remained throughout the night with his hostage and the two owners of the guesthouse. All the dead bodies were guarded where they lay, by police, during the long, cold night until they could be officially examined and removed in the light of day. Port Arthur must have been drenched with blood and reeking; Tasmanian devils are carnivorous. Two months later, and I often find my imagination flickers with the vision of the dead child behind the tree, watched over all night like a sleeping baby. I try to imagine being the watcher. The next morning the gunman ran burning from the burning house, leaving the three other people to die, and was captured.

Ambulances, police, camera crews, paramedics, helicopters, relatives, friends, reporters, politicians, doctors converged on Port Arthur. The world was able to watch as events unfolded, on television. We saw over and over again the silent, helpless face of the man whose wife and little daughters had

died; we saw the policeman who stated, with unbearable, loving simplicity and grief, that the child had died behind the tree; we saw a body on a gurney being wheeled again and again towards a helicopter. I began to imagine I knew the people— their faces, their actions had become so familiar, like figures in a favourite home movie. The smoking chimneys at the Seascape guesthouse; the approach to the Fox and Hounds Hotel where injured people hid from danger.

Then I watched the funerals, over and over, the same ones; many times I saw the children's coffins, heard their father speak of the uncertainty of life and happiness. The terrible and touching memorial services; the silence that fell over most of the country. There was a service in the open air at Port Arthur, on the grass with the pinky-golden ruins of the penitentiary in the background. There was prayer, and the singing of children. I sensed a great, overarching helplessness, and a heartbreaking fragility that was masquerading as strength. Everybody knew that, having been so close to sudden and violent evil, hatred and destruction, they would never be the same as they had been before. It was as though some terrible truth had been *explained.*

And there were two responses—there was bitter, bitter anger, with Biblical graffiti: 'An eye for an eye', and there was a powerful wave of love, goodness and courage. People spoke very quietly for a time. The sound, at the end of the open air memorial service, was the wail of the lone piper, a mournful celtic lament.

I saw the strange, brief, televised television hook-up between the man accused and the court of law. I read a lot of reportage and speculation about the man's life and state of mind and motives. Did he really share his bed with a pig? Perhaps. Some newspaper stories said he did. In any case, the story of the man and his pig chimes perfectly with the legendary Tasmania where brothers and sisters are lovers, and where strange creatures are born from the union of man and beast. Alongside the historical dramas of Tasmania runs a colourful theme of sexual repression and violence. One of the most telling modern debates in Tasmania rages around the laws forbidding homosexuality.

In the vigorous national debate about gun control which has developed from the massacre at Port Arthur, there has been little mention, at least in the press, of the sexual meanings of guns. Perhaps it is so obvious nobody needs to say it; perhaps we are weary of the clear and inescapable nexus between sex and violence, and are keen to place sex in the background for a time. The man with the gun at Port Arthur killed thirty-five people and he effectively raped the collective imagination of Australia.

As the story unreeled on television, people (helpless, gasping, clutching

for a hold on something they knew they had lost) people spoke of ‘Tasmania’s loss of innocence’. If Tasmania was ever innocent, it was innocent a long, long time ago. Let us never forget that the people who lived in Tasmania, when John Bowen and company first camped at Risdon in 1803, were Tasmanian Aborigines, a unique and distinct race, separate from any of the native people who lived on mainland Australia. By 1876 there were so very few of them left alive that it became possible for the official history to say they had completely died out. Plenty of Tasmanian Aborigines are living to this day, and yet they must still fight to be recognized for who they are. Last century they were hunted down, humiliated, gunned down, massacred. The official history betrays a kind of pride that a bunch of white men with guns were able to exterminate a whole race of black people.

And never far from Tasmanian consciousness is the Thylacine, the Tasmanian Tiger, a small, unique species, last seen in the Hobart zoo in 1937. The thylacine was effectively hunted into extinction, but some Tasmanians passionatley believe it is breeding in secret, believe they have seen it. It is a kind of emblem of a collective guilt about the past. For the Aborigines we have the myth of extinction; for the Thylacine we have the myth of survival. Must we be so perverse? One of my uncles used to call my brother ‘Tige’, short for Tasmanian Tiger. And if you go to a grog shop and ask for six Tigers you will get six bottles of Tasmanian beer.

The image of the hunt runs through the story of Tasmania, and it is no accident that a hotel should be called the Fox and Hounds. It was Governor Arthur who organized a series of ‘solutions’ to the problems of the relationship between the Aborigines and the settlers. He is perhaps best known for ordering a military expedition to round up all the Aborigines and put them in a reserve. It is cruelly ironic and fitting that the place where the recent massacre of innocent people occurred was named after Governor Arthur. In a spurt, a spree of proud and narcissistic cackling violence, the man with the Armalite AR-15 and the Simonov SKS-46 opened the way to many old, old wounds which have been suppurating beneath the surface of Tasmania for years, concealed, but active. There are far deeper issues than those involved in convicting the killer and arriving at a penalty—as if there could ever be one. Even his extermination would seem, on a scale of things, light retribution. Guns, violence, sex, racism, secrecy, lies. If the aftermath of 28 April 1996 is to provide a path to healing and sanity, then those are some of the issues that must be addressed.

Melbourne,
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