

For the Brisbane Courier Mail
And Meanjin Magazine.

Event: A Return to Uluru/Ayers Rock.

The Murder of Azaria

This Vast Stupendous Fraud.

John Bryson's Evil Angels was first published while Mrs Chamberlain was still in gaol for the murder of her baby. This year he returned to Uluru for the first time since that conviction.

The Uluru campsites and the barbeques familiar to scavenging dingoes in the 1980s are now demolished to remove visitors into the faraway Yulara complex, and the old sites have grown back into the landscape of red sandplain and dune, but occasional willie-willies will uncover a concrete slab onetime the base for an ablution block, or a timber flitch which once did duty as a marker for the parking of campervans or bounding tentsites.

August is a gentle month in the Centre. Visitors expect a warm easterly breeze of an afternoon, dropping out at dusk to calm evenings, as it was when the yellow Torana hatchback turned in here, carrying the Chamberlain family, Lindy nursing her sleeping babe, Pastor Michael driving, and the two young boys Aiden and Reagan.

Come morning they will breakfast at a near barbeque table with the family West from Esperance. Judy West is already surprised at the number of dingoes living

close to the campsites, which seems to be many. Last evening her daughter Catherine, a teenager, writing her diary outside, screamed, and Judy found her being pulled to the ground by a dingo single minded about dragging her off, never mind the mother's swiping fury. Later in the evening Judy would surprise a dingo tugging washed underwear from the neighbouring Daniells' makeshift clothesline for sport.

Judy West is right about the high number of dingoes. Rangers of the time believe about forty live in lairs beneath the Rock, and then Chief Ranger Derek Roff guesses fifteen or so form a bohemian class making a living from filching around the camps.

Roff's cottage stood about six hundred metres south of the campsites, and further away from the Rock. The site is since levelled, but it is here he sat at his desk one evening two weeks before the Chamberlains' arrived, writing a report to his superiors. He is worried by the increasing marauding confidence in the local dingo pack. Incidence of menace is higher, and he has dealt with four incidents of attack recently. He fears a fatality. His report ends with a plea for permission to shoot the most dangerous. A dingo, he writes,

“is well able to take advantage of any laxity on the part
of a prey species and, of course, children and babies
can be considered possible prey.”

Roff's report will be kept secret from the public and from the first coroner. Later investigators will not make it available to the Chamberlains' lawyers despite the usual rules of disclosure.

At the popular Climb the handrail still makes its straight line up the steepest section, but a new notice at the base asks visitors not to make the journey out of respect for the spirits who live within it: the immortals, the Sleepy Lizard, Kaniya the python, Red Lizard, the Bellbird Brothers, all creatures who created the Rock, the landscape, the world.

Pastor Michael made the climb. The morning was sunny, the breeze light. Very fit, he made it twice, the second with the two boys, whose mother thought they made a splendid trio, each with flashing blond hair. She stayed below, dandling the babe. This tableau gave rise later to rumours that Azaria was sacrificed on the Rock, to the rites of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the babe Mrs Chamberlain held was a clever effigy, a thing of swaddling and padding. Months later investigators

located two kind-hearted women, Florence Wilkins and Gwen Eccles, both grey nomads, both nursed the babe to briefly rest the mother. So did this first theory die.

A kilometre south, the freshwater pond beneath the red cliff-face was called the Maggie Spring when the Chamberlain family admired it. Now its signpost reads Mutijulu. The Cave of Fertility to its left, which the family toured first, is now closed, as sacred. Despite the scorn shown by Territorians at the transfer of demesne in Uluru to the Anangu, the level of care is higher now. Floorboard walkways keep sightseers above any fragilities, and away from vulnerable plant species. Any vandalism is by tourists. A system of radio alarms surrounds the Rock. Drinking-water is plentiful. Temperatures can reach fifty degrees Celsius mid-afternoon at ground level, and at night the air can freeze.

Here at Mutijulu the Chamberlains first saw a dingo at close range. It was standing higher on the rock-tumble, perhaps four paces away, intent on them. So unfamiliar a creature was it, that Mrs Chamberlain asked a nearby tourist, James McCombe, "Is that your dog?" She said later, with a shiver, it seemed to be staring all the while at the babe in her arms.

Now, the current guides will say, they may not see a dingo for weeks. So few are they that guides will hope to interest visitors with other animals. A favourite is a white rabbit which lives with a small colony here.

Roads around the Rock are now tarmac, show speed limits, double lines prohibit overtaking on bends. The modern count of daily traffic is four times the rate it was when the yellow Torana drove from the Sunset Hill, always a popular vantage for watching the Rock change hue as the sun fades, to their campsite, along sandy tracks which were graded often, so the roadway was always lower than the surrounding landscape. It parked alongside their small white tent.

Visitors find the heat of day best dealt with at a slow pace so, as the light fades, the level of activity quickens. This is true also of the activity of native animals: rodents creep cautiously out, snakes slide from the tussocks, erect lizards dash about on splayed rear feet. Evening is the time for hunting.

As it is for dingoes. The fragrance of barbeques drew them closer to the centre of dinnertime activity. The family Haby, not long arrived here, were cooking in their Combivan when a dingo appeared in the doorway, and stood through photographs, trotting away when not offered food. Sally Lowe, clearing away meal scraps nearby, made a trip to the rubbish bins in darkness and was followed back to

the tables by a dingo which took care to stay in shadow. Washing dishes, the Whittackers were listening to Sunday hymns on the radio, watched by a dingo which trotted about always just beyond the margins of light. Beside the Chamberlain's table Pastor Michael trapped a small bush mouse in the beam of his torch when, in an instant, the burning red eyes and white teeth of a dingo flashed in the beam, mouse and dingo now gone into the darkness. The time was seven minutes to eight.

Judy West, reading at her tent, heard a dingo growl. So did her husband. Sally Lowe, talking with the Chamberlains, heard a baby cry and alerted the mother. Mrs Chamberlain headed for their tent. A dingo was bounding from the flap. The baby's crib was empty.

The voices, then, would take these folk a long time to piece together in memory. 'My God, my God, a dingo's got my baby.' 'What?' 'Will someone please stop that dog.' 'Where?' 'That way.' 'Has anybody got a torch?' 'What a hell of a thing.'

The first thought of Chief Ranger Roff, summoned to organise a search, was, 'So, it's finally happened.'

The news moved quickly. Dozens of campers spread out over the plain and the near dune swinging their lights and calling to one another. Police drove in with a Toyota four wheel drive. Roff and other rangers called the searchers in for co-ordination, then they spread out again. With volunteers from the motels and other staff their numbers swelled to the hundreds. Roff sent for black-trackers, and ordered reserves of torch batteries from the small local store. While their husbands searched, the campsite wives stayed with Pastor Michael and Mrs Chamberlain.

Two searchers found dingo tracks climbing the dune, but lost them again because the ground was tramped over. One was camper Murray Haby from the Combivan, who followed them, and the drag marks of something carried, into the carpark higher on the dune where the ground was too hard for an impression.

The other was local tracker Nuwe Minyintiri, who refused use of a flashlight because a flaming brand made from brushwood gave a broader light. The rangers walked with him, following the pad pugs and the drag marks higher. He stopped and crouched. Here was a bowl shaped mark, a crimped or knitted pattern, where a bundle had lain briefly. The gesture of his hand was sad, 'It not move anymore' he said.

The local Anangu have a maxim, 'The people come and the people go, but the events of the place live on.' Walking the dune on a moonless night three decades later, lit by the whirling galaxies of the universe, a belief that the events here live on is compelling, perhaps because the enormity of the tragedy, which was just beginning with the death of a child, gives it a peculiar power, as if the action proceeds apace eternally just beyond human vision.

If we reinstate the tableau on the opposite side of the campsite from the Chamberlains' frantic pacing, the yellow Torana and the small tent standing together, both quiet now, the two boys asleep in the tent, Aiden sobbing in his sleep, lying on bedding flecked with bloodstains. Azaria's blood has splashed over one of the boy's jackets and her mother's track pants. A pool of blood has soaked into their floral mattress. The baby bassinet is empty. The rumpled bedding has been searched now three times in case the baby is lost underneath.

The tent steams in the cold air because of the warmth within it. Dingo paw tracks outside the tent-flap are already noted by Constable Morris, but later fade under passing footfalls. Blood stains the tent pole, the flyscreen, the rear window and a roof edge. A fine bloodspray rakes an outside wall. These will be analysed years after the event, a time when the blood can no longer be attributed to a species.

The car is now dimpled with freezing dewdrops. The windows are wound up. A later Crown prosecution will say its cabin is now awash with blood, Mrs Chamberlain has decapitated her baby here with a pair of nail scissors while in the front passenger seat, spraying the footwell with Azaria's blood, hiding the body in her husband's camera bag in front of the driver's seat.

The Chamberlains will be sent to trial where a laboratory technician will give evidence that she has identified baby's blood on a hinge under the passenger seat, a spay of it in the passenger footwell, and soaked into the driver's side carpet.

How the hinge holds traces of baby's blood, when sealed with a plastic cover since manufacture will never be explained. At a Royal Commission of Inquiry six years after the death, Justice Morling* will determine that the bloodspray in the passenger footwell is in fact a sound deadening emulsion Dufix 101 from the time of manufacture by General Motors. He will find that the blood-soak in the driver's side carpet is sucrose, most likely the spill of an old milkshake. All other items which react to testing as for any type of blood is likely to be a confusion with copper,

common in the breezes of Mount Isa, where the Chamberlains live. No evidence, he will rule, supports the possibility of baby's blood in the little yellow Torana.

After midnight, and one final sweep, Chief Ranger Roff calls the searchers back to the common to turn in for the night. He doubts if any scrap of the baby will be found. Pastor Michael addresses them all with the heartfelt thanks of the family. Several come forward to hug him, which ruins his manly resolve against tearfulness.

From this campsite, at that time, the lights of the Uluru Motel show through the scrub to the west. Word has arrived that it will accept the family overnight so they will not need to face sleeping in the tent.

The boys and their mother make this short journey in the police car. Amy Whittaker helps Pastor Michael load clothing from the tent into the car. Onetime a nurse, she smells no blood in the car, and collects no smear. The local nurse, Roberta Downs, now rides to the motel in the front passenger seat of the Torana. She smells no blood and collects no smear.

The motel lay closer to the south-western corner of the Rock than did the campsite, and to the feature called the Lichen, named for the fungus which stains the high wall. A week after Azaria's death her singlet, grow-suit and booties would be found here by the family Goodwin. This would encourage later investigators to suppose that Pastor Michael sometime undressed the body of his murdered child and secreted the clothes there. The finding will lead Chief Ranger Roff to the opposite conclusion, since he knows this is also the site of four dingo lairs.

A murder theory requires some human presence in all this, but no Australian pathologist will be persuaded to stretch the imagination this far, so an opinion will be provided by Professor Cameron, a London pathologist who has already cost the British Government grand sums in compensation for miscarriage of justice, and who teaches his students the value of Court-craft, a technique which recognises that a convincing narrative is more important than excellent science in winning legal court cases.

Cameron will be happy to give his scientific opinion that the clothing carries bloodstains more consistent with decapitation by nail scissors than chewing in the jaws of a dingo, and the tiny singlet bears the imprint of a bloodied human hand. The stain on this singlet will later be shown to be desert sand, and the human handprint that of an unusual person, having six digits per hand, while the rest of humankind can count only to five.

Recalling the happenings at these abandoned sites is difficult without dismay, without a tremor in the note-taking hand, without a teardrop in the eye. Nowhere is more affecting than the outline of foundations of the Red Sands Motel where, in the barroom on the night after the search began, the first journalists here drink with police who have flown in from Alice Springs. A detective and a journalist are vehement in their denial of the Chamberlains' version. No history of a death this way ever before, becomes their frequent jibe. The detective storms away, returns with a plastic bucket of sand. This is the weight of Azaria Chamberlain. He insists each try to hold it for one minute in the teeth. Perhaps because of the laughter, none is able.

A silly incident, but the first of many trials and experiments in laboratories and in the field, with which it has in common three notable aspects: it is kept secret, it is not subjected to testing, and it begins a fresh set of rumours against the Chamberlains.

Precisely here, and at this moment, humankind took over from a dingo the harassment of that depleted family; at this moment began the contagious scepticism which would infect a core of investigators with a belief in the Chamberlains' guilt so deeply that they would deny the usual practice of fair disclosure, gather evidence later exposed as fallacy, open proceedings against the Chamberlains in a secret court, manage the reporting of a looming prosecution by news releases to friendly journalists, forbid their scientists to release their findings for peer reviews, destroy evidence of blood testing so it could not be examined at the trial, cause this family to suspect they are the tragic playthings of their God, and press to a successful conclusion The Azaria Murder Case, this vast stupendous fraud.

* Canberra: Govt. Printer 1987.

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