The Brave New Feminist World of Joan Lindsay’s ‘Picnic at Hanging Rock’

Hanging Rock is a volcanic formation on the plains below Mount Macedon, about 80 kilometres north of Melbourne. It is physically spectacular and intriguing, and excites the imagination because it is awesome, with huge monoliths and boulders and, it seems, “bottomless pits”. One is made aware that only some huge force entirely beyond man’s control could create such a thing, and thus the rock may seem, depending on one’s attitude to that force, either frightening or attractive or both. Many would agree that it is peculiarly “Australian”, to a European consciousness. Outside the cities, the Australian bush (and generally it is indeed the “bush” that one thinks of rather than, as for example in England, the “countryside”) is both wild and sensuously appealing, provoking a strong elemental reaction – giving one the sense that European civilization is somehow inappropriate, or at least something we cannot take for granted in a superficial way. The values of European civilization may well be universal, but nature in Australia seems to subject them to a severe test. We are urged (or so it appears) to go back to what is fundamental in our existence, to start with a new awareness.

Joan Lindsay, both through birth and through marriage, belonged to an influential elite in Australia. She was born in Melbourne in 1896, the daughter of the late Honourable Justice Theyre à Beckett Weigall, Victoria, and the granddaughter of Sir Robert Hamilton, Governor of Tasmania. She married Sir Daryl Lindsay in 1922. Sir Daryl, who painted himself and was the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria from 1942 – 56, was one of several distinguished brothers, of whom the painter Norman is probably the most famous. Lady Joan was both an artist and a writer, but will probably remain best known in the latter capacity, particularly as the author of Picnic at Hanging Rock, but also, one hopes, as that of, notably, Time Without Clocks (1962) and Facts Soft and Hard (1964). I shall argue that Picnic at Hanging Rock is in some respects a very ideological novel; but, to the best of my knowledge, Joan Lindsay was not a particularly ideological person. I am not, however, at all closely aquainted with her life, and a biography is yet to appear. She died in 1984.

Joan Lindsay wrote Picnic at Hanging Rock late in life. The novel was first published in Australia in 1967, by Cheshire Publishing Pty Ltd in Melbourne. It went from strength to strength commercially, as Chatto
and Windus Ltd (London) launched it in Britain in 1968, and Penguin Books has several times reprinted it from 1970 (in this essay, all quotations will be from the second 1975 reprint). Eventually, a film was made in 1975 under the directorship of Peter Weir (now well established in the United States), which was a considerable success internationally, although not as large a popular seller as the recent “Crocodile Dundee” featuring Paul Hogan. In 1987, there has been a renewed interest in the book as a result of the publication of the so-called “final chapter” under the title *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, published by Angus & Robertson Publishers, simultaneously in North Ryde, New South Wales, and London. This chapter was, for literary reasons, withheld from publication at the request of the book’s original publishers. Although Joan Lindsay complied with this request, she decided that the chapter would be released after her death, but only then. As the ending of the 1967 version of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* had been found quite enigmatic by many of its readers — and of those who had only seen the film — many thousands of people have bought the “final chapter” in the hope that it would put an end to their uncertainty.1

It might have done, of course, or at least in a physical sense. In the event, it does not really add a great deal to what we can derive from the novel as it was originally published, either physically or otherwise. And that is not really surprising. It is almost inconceivable that the novel, or the film, would have created such tremendous interest if there had been a simple physical “solution” to explain it all away. Lindsay’s book certainly uses some of the ingredients of, say, an Agatha Christie thriller. Four people mysteriously disappear early on, and, like Christie, Lindsay spends much of her time giving us an account of the consequences of the original main event(s), and of the efforts of those involved in trying to solve the mystery. But in an Agatha Christie thriller, all is solved at the end. Once we know, physically, just what has happened, we are, for the moment, satisfied, and no questions remain beyond that moment (which is also the reason why our satisfaction cannot last). It is a measure of Lindsay’s stature that no physical solution could possibly answer our queries. What she offers is much too large for that.

The original motif may well have come to Lindsay when she was still at school, Clyde School (now Braemar College), which she attended from 1911 to 1914. This school later moved to “Woodend” (a real place referred to in the novel) and no doubt was the real-life model for what Lindsay in her book calls “Appleyard College”, so named after the headmistress whom she styles “Mrs. Appleyard”. Pupils of the school were treated, each year, to a picnic at Hanging Rock. I do not know whether anyone has bothered to find out when these yearly visits started, or that it matters. They must have commenced well before Lindsay’s time, as she very relevantly refers in her book to a painting housed in the National Gallery of Victoria (in Melbourne), called “Picnic at Hanging Rock, 1875”, painted by William Ford. Ford is hardly one of the greats of Australian painting, but his picture clearly reveals the oddity of schoolgirls going on an English-style “picnic” to Hanging Rock. The Hanging Rock itself demands to be climbed, but the girls are portrayed as staying at the foot of the sight, all prim and proper in their neat, impractical, puritanical Victorian dresses. Whether or not Ford was aware of the discrepancy between nature and such “civilisation” as the girls were ruled by does not greatly matter: the incongruity is there for all to see.

Still, in Ford’s painting the girls stay where, according to Mrs. Appleyard in Joan Lindsay’s novel, they are meant to stay. As she had told them, “the Rock itself is extremely dangerous” and therefore they are “forbidden to engage in any tomboy foolishness in the matter of exploration, even on the lower slopes” (p. 14). Despite this warning, some of the pupils, and indeed (independently) one of the mistresses, do engage in “the matter of exploration”, and two of them, as well as the reckless mistress, disappear mysteriously. At first, indeed, it might have seemed as though four girls got lost, but one of them came back screaming, while another was found several days later, as mysteriously alive as she first vanished.

In the absence of the recently published chapter, theories were rife as to just what might have happened to the women (one adult, two schoolgirls) physically. We now know that they were not picked up by a UFO, murdered etc., but – as always seemed most likely – were absorbed by the rock. To be precise, they disappeared through a hole in it. No doubt it will be argued for a long time to come whether they went to their death or not; and there will be yet more debate about the significance of it all. It is this latter question, particularly, which I shall address in my interpretation below.

To date, by far the most thorough analysis of the book is offered by Yvonne Rousseau, in *The Murders at Hanging Rock* (Fitzroy, Victoria: Scribe Publication Pty Ltd, 1980). In fact, Rousseau offers a variety of possible interpretations of the original Picnic. One or two seem a good deal less probable than they should be, and must now probably be abandoned; for example, it can hardly be sustained that there is any false play involving young men. But there are, I think, two interpretations which are persuasive, and which — contrary to her own view of what she is doing — do not seem incompatible. In Chapter 6, Rousseau offers the most promising approach. As she informs us, the intuition of those who
divine a supernatural solution is that the girls have followed some
otherworldly call; that Miranda, the leader, had greater knowledge, and
perhaps another nature, than her fellows imagined; and that, by their
dancing within the ritual circle (outlined in stone), the three girls were
initiated into a subtilizing process which transfigured and finally effaced
their physical existence. (p. 59)

One of the three girls, we must assume, in the last resort does not qualify
in this process; she, Irma, is the one who is found back and thus cannot
be assumed to have had her physical existence effaced. The older woman
who does disappear, the mathematics teacher Miss McCraw, apparently
goes through a transfiguration similar to that of the schoolgirls. It is
also possible, of course, that the physical transformation does not involve
effacement. This is a possibility which Rousseau investigates in Chapter
7. She there quotes (p. 119) a significant passage from an authoritative
work on Australian Aboriginals:

The tradition is widespread among Aboriginal Australians, that women
used to own the most sacred rites and emblems (which were later stolen
by the men); that is, the primeval initiation is received by women.
(Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine M. Berndt, The World of the First
Australians, Sydney, Ure Smith, 1964, p. 214)

Following this line of thought, we would have to suppose that the women
get transformed — physically — into the landscape itself, sacrificing them-

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although the fact appears to have gone undetected. Surely, it is not inappropriate to think of Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I would not go so far as to say that Shakespeare's play actually provided a source for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, but a comparison between the two works is highly illuminating, and as Shakespeare's Miranda is so famous it is, after all, possible that Lindsay wishes us to think of her.

*The Tempest* can, of course, be read in more than one way. Personally, I think that Prospero is much too flawed to deserve such uncritical praise as critics often have for him and which they claim Shakespeare shares with them. But Miranda is a very different proposition. She is, indeed, someone hard to fault, and we may assume with confidence that her name has such a religious significance as that of Miranda of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Like Lindsay, Shakespeare draws attention to her name in more than one place. In III.1, her husband-to-be, Ferdinand, asks her what her name is.

Miranda: O my father,
I have broke your hest to say so!
Ferdinand: Admir'd Miranda!
Indeed the top of admiration ...
(36–38)²

It seems very likely that Lindsay, in writing her book, remembered the play here on "Miranda" ... "Admir'd" ... "admiration". It is worth realizing that, of course, the words had more force in Shakespeare's time; if one "admired" one did not merely "esteem" but "feel wonder at". Thus it is not surprising if in V.1, where Ferdinand and Miranda are found playing chess, Sebastian exclaims! A most high miracle!" (177), and that Alonso should wonder whether she is a "goddess" (187). She is nevertheless perhaps more of a flesh-and-blood creature than the Miranda of Lindsay's novel, but there are clear hints of her having, like Lindsay's heroine, something like divine perfection.

The primary quality stressed in both cases appears to be that of a totally unselfish love. Lindsay's Miranda, like Shakespeare's, is not only the object of love amongst all those who come into contact with her, but appears to inspire this reaction as a result of her own capacity for loving others unreservedly. The association with love is immediate in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in that we are introduced to her on Saint Valentine's day. As Lindsay is aware, to many of us Saint Valentine is "traditionally concerned with the lesser frivolities of romantic love" (p. 156), but one can also view him more seriously as "the patron saint of lovers" (p. 151). Lindsay at first appears to have the former meaning in mind when she says that "Miranda as usual had a drawer of her wardrobe filled with lace-trimmed pledges of affection" (p. 9), but what stands out is the genuine love expressed by her father, and soon after she herself is described as

"charitable" (p. 10). In *The Tempest*, too, Prospero's fatherly love for his Miranda is obvious at once, and it is significant that, thinking about the shipwreck which his art may have caused, Miranda shows what he calls "The very true compassion in thee" (I.1.27).

In both works, however, love is not merely that which one associates with charity or such Platonic love as fathers feel for children. The heroines are of about the same age, and about to develop into mature women. The transition from child to woman is something of central concern and interest in both authors. Sexually, however, what happens in Shakespeare is far less extraordinary than in Lindsay. Shakespeare evidently assumes that his Miranda, being at the age she is, will be sexually attractive to men, and that marriage will be her normal destiny. Hence, enter Ferdinand, who succeeds Caliban — the very earthy creature that has already lusted after her. From any conventional point of view, Ferdinand's behaviour is impeccable. Soon after he has first set eyes on Miranda, he addresses her as follows:

O, if a virgin,
And your affection not gone forth, I'll make you
The Queen of Naples.

(1.2.447–49)

He expects his future wife to be a virgin, but he applies the same standard of himself. In IV.1, Prospero admonishes him not to "... break their virgin-knot before// All sanctimonious ceremonies may// With full and holy rite be minis'tred" (15–17), and Ferdinand shows himself obedient to this command. Shakespeare reveals that a sexual drive is present, though more in Ferdinand than in Miranda, but it has to be controlled until marriage, when it will have its proper place. Shakespeare does not seem to be very interested in Miranda's sexual feelings; she does not stipulate that he (Ferdinand) must be a virgin if he is to marry her, but wonders, when he moves into her vision, whether he is "a spirit"

(1.2.409).

By contrast, much of the development of Joan Lindsay's Miranda is described in sexual terms, though, peculiarly, her emerging sexuality is not directed towards men, or a response to them. It would not be correct either to claim that it is Lesbian in focus, even though the interrelationship of the young women in her world are very intense and emotional. Rather, Lindsay is preoccupied with the development of young women per se, and she sees men as decidedly less important. Her claim in this regard is clearly that women come first, men second. The source of human life is to be found in Eve, not Adam.

Thus Miranda for one thing represents Venus. When she begins to explore the rock, she turns her shining head and gravely smiles at the French teacher, Mademoiselle Dianne de Poitiers. At this moment,
Mademoiselle is reminded of a Botticelli painting: “Miranda was a Botticelli angel from the Uffizi” (p. 26). Yvonne de Rousseau appears to believe that Lindsay concurs with Mademoiselle’s view. In passing, she observes that the film version presents the Botticelli angel as the goddess Venus, but she herself wonders whether the angel may derive from Botticelli’s “Coronation of the Virgin”, which is indeed to be found in the Uffizi in Florence. However, there is really no likeness that one can imagine, and it seems that the makers of the film – although imperfectly – are closer to Lindsay’s intention than Rousseau is willing to grant. Unfortunately, the film only shows the head of the painting (also in the Uffizi) which we are to remember, viz. “The Birth of Venus”. This makes it understandable that Rousseau should dismiss the interpretation of the film as incorrect. As it happens, however, Mademoiselle is guilty of an error, and although Lindsay does not wish to prevent us from associating Miranda with an angel, it is unmistakably “The Birth of Vernus” which she refers to later in the book, when the young man Michael Fitzhubert has a vision of Miranda “beside a giant clamshell” (p. 130). Oddly, Rousseau is in fact reminded of the fact that it is on such a clamshell that “Venus rode to shore after her birth from the foam of the sea”, but remains unaware of the fact that that shell is a dominant note in the Botticelli painting in which we see Venus not beside it, but on it. The makers of the film, too, fail to establish the connection with “The Birth of Venus”, as they, at this juncture, do show a shell, but so inconspicuously that noone could infer from its appearance that Miranda is to be seen as Venus.

Lindsay, however, does of course want us to understand that Miranda is like Venus just born, a goddess of love rather than merely, as before, a young girl. And her birth as Venus is emphasized because Lindsay is, as a feminist, concerned to show us that the people who matter most in a new kind of existence to be entered into Australia are women: women are thus presented not only as giving birth, but also as being born. There is no important place for them in all this. In a curiously powerful way, Lindsay makes them largely superfluous. Michael Fitzhubert first sees Miranda when she and her companions just begin to move up the rock. He half-heartedly follows her, but cannot match her initiative. The result is that, although he remains obsessed with his vision of her (and presumably with what she represents) throughout the book, he is not given the same right of entry into a new life. The best he can do, with great effort, is to find Irma near the spot where Miranda has disappeared, but, like her, he will not belong to a new order. It is not even so much that he does something very wrong, but that he is very much a follower, not a leader.

Yet, although Lindsay’s favoured women are strangely self-contained, she does see them as sexual beings. Michael’s Australian friend (he himself is very English) has a more earthy attitude to girls, and this coachman, Albert Crundall, whistles at them. This shocks Michael, who claims that “nice girls don’t like being whistled at by fellows they don’t know”, to which Albert replies that “The shellas is all alike when it comes to fellers” (p. 29). There is no real evidence for this particular claim, as the girls do not appear to care for men at all; but Albert’s remark does point in the right direction in that the girls are not prudes.

That point is one which Lindsay stresses by making them, to an extent at least, undress as part of their progression towards womanhood. Even before they are really close to the site of the rock, they take off their gloves, and once they are well on their way towards the top, they take off their shoes and stockings too. In the novel as it originally stands, one cause for amazement is that Irma, when found near the place where the other girls vanished, is without her corset.3 To the Victorians who are in the majority in the world of Picnic at Hanging Rock the burning question is whether Irma is “intact”. Lindsay, however, sees her girls as moving into a modern world, after Saint Valentine’s Day 1900. Her attitude to feminine clothing as approved by the Victorians is one D.H. Lawrence might have condoned. Thus she describes the party of schoolgirls at the picnic in the following terms:

Insulated from natural contacts with earth, air, and sunlight, by corsets pressing on the solar plexus, by voluminous petticoats, cotton stockings and kid boots, the drowsy well-fed girls lounging in the shade were no more a part of their environment than figures in a photograph album...

In the new order, those who are fit to do so will expose themselves to Nature and shake off the bad old English ways. The miracle of Irma’s vanished corset is now explained to us by the appearance of the Secret of Hanging Rock, in which it is part of the final process leading up to their disappearance that Miranda, Irma and Marion take off their corsets.

And Lindsay’s point is, of course, that the “solar plexus” will be freed as a result of contact with the force of the rock. Now a conventional reader might think that, somehow, the rock is male. The people of the nineteenth century society do not think quite in this way, but they do speculate on the possibility that the girls have come to grief as a consequence of molestation by one or more males. They are mistaken, not only in their literal-mindedness, but also in that, in Lindsay’s world, a male force is not, or certainly not initially, of great importance. On the contrary, the girls are absorbed into the rock because the rock itself is female.

That this is so is made clear in more than one place. The following
passage from Chapter 3, for example, is revealing, particularly where I have italicized it:

'We can’t go much further,' said Miranda. 'Remember, girls, I promised Mademoiselle we wouldn’t be long away.'

At every step the prospect ahead grew more enchanting with added detail of crenellated crags and lichen-patterned stone. Now a mountain laurel glossy above the dogwood’s dusty silver leaves, now a dark slit between two rocks where maiden hair fern trembled like green lace. (p. 35)

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One might think that it is no accident that she, literally, leads the way on the rock. But the unpublished chapter makes plain that it is in fact Miss McGraw who first ventures into the hole. Possibly this change in roles is deliberate: Lindsay may wish to emphasize that we need both the "female" and the "male" mental qualities in the women of the new age. The unpublished Chapter expands, in essence, what we already know (if we think carefully) from Chapter 3, but, although we have no reason to alter our perception of things, there are some things we find out for the first time. Without it, we would have reason to conclude that the "feminine" qualities are superior.

Of course, to say that Miranda appears to embody what is "feminine" is not at all to say that Lindsay in any sense presents her as weak or soft. On the contrary, she is a very potent force, and her ability to lead seems to spring from the fact that it is she who loves most actively, who most readily accepts the lure of the rock with the least fear and question, and who knows best what is, in a profound sense, good for her and her companions. And these qualities are not at all incompatible with others, in her, which we might think of as "masculine." Thus her exploratory drive no doubt is connected with the fact that she is a member of "one of Australia's best known pioneer families" (p. 68). Although her movements are for the most part graceful and could thus be seen as "feminine," she also has "masculine" physical skills. "At the age of five," her father loved to remember, "our Miranda threw a leg over a horse like a boundary rider" (p. 35).

What is the value of all this? Let me attempt an answer to this by no means easy question.

Artistically, the book is a very skilled production. One may complain, however, that there is a degree of vagueness concerning what actually happens to the girls (including Miss McGraw) who finally disappear into the hole. I do not mean that we should have been told exactly whether they were transformed physically or spiritually, or in both respects. We should be prepared to accept that clearly they move into a totally different world, where ordinary expectations do not apply. We might nevertheless have been given a rather more precise indication of just what that world is like, however extraordinary. And this is of course a matter of content, too. One could hardly claim that Joan Lindsay gives us a rather tangible goal which we might aspire to. We might, for example, have been given a picture of heaven or some sort of new society. In the absence of such thing, we can only address the question of what we think about her description of how one reaches some realm of which we know little, but which nevertheless some who are chosen feel attracted to and
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but feel, however, that she would have produced something yet more impressive if she had more searchingly questioned her own assumptions about humankind.

Notes

1 It is misleading to speak of a “final chapter” if we take that expression to mean that Lindsay would literally have placed it at the end of her book if the publisher had not dissuaded her. In fact, it must originally have been attached to Chapter 3, which is “final” in that it goes further than any other chapter in giving us a picture of what happens to the girls that go missing. As the novel now stands, some of the details of the recently published chapter have been worked into Chapter 3. This must have happened after Lindsay and the publisher agreed that the original “Chapter 4” (as we might as well call it) would not appear, but that its absence would necessitate a re-write of Chapter 3.

2 All references to The Tempest are to the version found in Peter Alexander, ed.: William Shakespeare: The Complete Works (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951). When this article was already complete, my attention was drawn to a paper by Malcom Crick: “Corsets, Culture and Contingency: Reflections on Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock”, Mankind, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1985), pp. 231–42, which had escaped me. On p. 234, Crick observes about Miranda in the novel: “Like Miranda in The Tempest, she is, as her name literally means, ‘to be admired’”. But this is not what her name literally means, and, although Crick appears to be the first critic to have noted the parallel with Miranda in The Tempest, he does not explore the significance of that parallel. His article is interesting, though, offering an anthropological approach leading to a “cultural” reading. His argument is in essence that the novel shows how those with authority in the cultural order do violence to human nature; the inexplicable is threatening to a cultural order, and in Picnic at Hanging Rock a stable, rigidly controlled cultural universe is undermined by inexplicable disappearances”. See also the exchange between Crick and John Taylor in Mankind, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1988), pp. 55–56.

3 Miss McGraw, too, partakes in this development, although she does not climb the rock in the presence of the girls. The “dunce” Edith, when she rushes down, meets the teacher en route, and observes that she is without a skirt, in bloomers. The fact that Miss McGraw is older than the trinity of Miranda-Irma-Marion is of little significance: she still can, and needs to, develop into a mature woman.

4 Michael Fitzhubert repeatedly associates her with a swan and its movement. Her walk is more than once described as gliding. While the image of the (white) swan no doubt has all such symbolic connotations as we know from, say, Yeats, we must not underestimate the very real femininity which it brings out in Miranda.
Critics have made a great deal of the importance of “time” (in various meanings) in the novel. It is essential to realize above all, however, that ordinary laws of nature simply have no status in the world into which the girls move. Whatever other complex notion of “time” Lindsay may have in mind, the chief reason why people’s watches stop near the rock is that it represents something altogether novel and unknown.

I know of nothing in her life which would lead us to expect this attitude, but I believe that the novel expresses it unambiguously.