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Forging Continuing Bonds from the Dead to the Living: Gothic Commemorative Practices along Australia's Leichhardt Highway

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The Leichhardt Highway is a six hundred-kilometre stretch of sealed inland road that joins the Australian Queensland border town of Goondiwindi with the Capricorn Highway, just south of the Tropic of Capricorn. Named after the young Prussian naturalist Ludwig Leichhardt, part of this roadway follows the route his party took as they crossed northern Australia from Morton Bay (Brisbane) to Port Essington (near Darwin). Ignoring the usual colonial practice of honouring the powerful and aristocratic, Leichhardt named the noteworthy features along this route after his supporters and fellow expeditioners. Many of these names are still in use and a series of public monuments have also been erected in the intervening century and a half to commemorate this journey. Unlike Leichhardt, who survived his epic trip, some contemporary travellers who navigate the remote roadway named in his honour do not arrive at their final destinations. Memorials to these violently interrupted lives line the highway, many enigmatically located in places where there is no obvious explanation for the lethal violence that occurred there. This examination profiles the memorials along Leichhardt's highway as Gothic practice, in order to illuminate some of the uncanny paradoxes around public memorials, as well as the loaded emotional terrain such commemorative practices may inhabit.

All humans know that death awaits them (Morell). Yet, despite this, and the unprecedented torrent of images of death and dying saturating news, television, and social media (Duwe; Sumiala; Bisceglia), Gorer's mid-century ideas about the denial of death and Becker's 1973 Pulitzer prize-winning description of the purpose of human civilization as a defence against this knowledge remains current in the contemporary trope that individuals (at least in the West) deny their mortality. Contributing to this enigmatic situation is how many deny the realities of aging and bodily decay—the promise of the "life extension" industries (Hall)—and are shielded from death by hospitals, palliative care providers, and the multimillion dollar funeral industry (Kiernan). Drawing on Piatti-Farnell's concept of popular culture artefacts as "haunted/haunting" texts, the below describes how memorials to the dead can powerfully reconnect those who experience them with death's reality, by providing an "encrypted passageway through which the dead re-join the living in a responsive cycle of exchange and experience" (Piatti-Farnell). While certainly very different to the "sublime" iconic Gothic structure, the Gothic ruin that Summers argued could be seen as "a sacred relic, a memorial, a symbol of infinite sadness, of tenderest sensibility and regret" (407), these memorials do function in both this way as melancholy/regret-inducing relics as well as in Piatti-Farnell's sense of bringing the dead into everyday consciousness. Such memorialising activity also evokes one of Spooner's features of the Gothic, by acknowledging "the legacies of the past and its burdens on the present" (8).

Ludwig Leichhardt and His Highway

When Leichhardt returned to Sydney in 1846 from his 18-month journey across northern Australia, he was greeted with surprise and then acclaim. Having mounted his expedition without any backing from influential figures in the colony, his party was presumed lost only weeks after its departure. Yet, once Leichhardt and almost all his expedition returned, he was hailed "Prince of Explorers" (Erdos). When awarding him a significant purse raised by public subscription, then Speaker of the Legislative Council voiced what he believed would be the explorer's lasting memorial—the public memory of his achievement: "the undying glory of having your name enrolled amongst those of the great men whose genius and enterprise have impelled them to seek for fame in the prosecution of geographical science" (ctd. Leichhardt 539). Despite this acclaim, Leichhardt was a controversial figure in his day; his

future prestige not enhanced by his Prussian/Germanic background or his disappearance two years later attempting to cross the continent. What troubled the colonial political class, however, was his transgressive act of naming features along his route after commoners rather than the colony's aristocrats.

Today, the Leichhardt Highway closely follows Leichhardt's 1844-45 route for some 130 kilometres from Miles, north through Wandoan to Taroom. In the first weeks of his journey, Leichhardt named 16 features in this area: 6 of the more major of these after the men in his party—including the Aboriginal man 'Charley' and boy John Murphy—4 more after the tradesmen and other non-aristocratic sponsors of his venture, and the remainder either in memory of the journey's quotidian events or natural features there found. What we now accept as traditional memorialising practice could in this case be termed as Gothic, in that it upset the rational, normal order of its day, and by honouring humble shopkeepers, blacksmiths and Indigenous individuals, revealed the "disturbance and ambivalence" (Botting 4) that underlay colonial class relations (Macintyre).

On 1 December 1844, Leichhardt also memorialised his own past, referencing the Gothic in naming a watercourse The Creek of the Ruined Castles due to the "high sandstone rocks, fissured and broken like pillars and walls and the high gates of the ruined castles of Germany" (57). Leichhardt also disturbed and disfigured the nature he so admired, famously carving his initials deep into trees along his route—a number of which still exist, including the so-called Leichhardt Tree, a large coolibah in Taroom's main street. Leichhardt also wrote his own memorial, keeping detailed records of his experiences—both good and more regretful—in the form of field books, notebooks and letters, with his major volume about this expedition published in London in 1847.

Leichhardt's journey has since been memorialised in various ways along the route. The Leichhardt Tree has been further defaced with numerous plaques nailed into its ancient bark, and the town's federal government-funded Bicentennial project raised a formal memorial—a large sandstone slab laid with three bronze plaques—in the newly-named Ludwig Leichhardt Park. Leichhardt's name also adorns many sites both along, and outside, the routes of his expeditions. While these fittingly include natural features such as the Leichhardt River in north-west Queensland (named in 1856 by Augustus Gregory who crossed it by searching for traces of the explorer's ill-fated 1848 expedition), there are also many businesses across Queensland and the Northern Territory less appropriately carrying his name.

More somber monuments to Leichhardt's legacy also resulted from this journey. The first of these was the white settlement that followed his declaration that the countryside he moved through was well endowed with fertile soils. With squatters and settlers moving in and land taken up before Leichhardt had even arrived back in Sydney, the local Yeeman people were displaced, mistreated and completely eradicated within a decade (Elder). Mid-twentieth century, Patrick White's literary reincarnation, Voss of the eponymous novel, and paintings by Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker have enshrined in popular memory not only the difficult (and often described as Gothic) nature of the landscape through which Leichhardt travelled (Adams; Mollinson, and Bonham), but also the distinctive and contrary blend of intelligence, spiritual mysticism, recklessness, and stoicism Leichhardt brought to his task.

Roadside Memorials

Today, the Leichhardt Highway is also lined with a series of roadside shrines to those who have died much more recently. While, like cenotaphs, tombstones, and cemeteries, these memorialise the dead, they differ in usually marking the exact location that death occurred. In 43 BC, Cicero articulated the idea of the dead living in memory, "The life of the dead consists in the recollection cherished of them by the living" (93), yet Nelson is one of very few contemporary writers to link roadside memorials to elements of Gothic sensibility. Such constructions can, however, be described as Gothic, in that they make the roadway unfamiliar by inscribing onto it the memory of corporeal trauma and, in the process, re-creating their locations as vivid sites of pain and suffering.

These are also enigmatic sites. Traffic levels are generally low along the flat or gently undulating terrain and many of these memorials are located in locations where there is no obvious explanation for the violence that occurred there. They are loci of contradictions, in that they are both more private than other memorials, in being designed, and often made and erected, by family and friends of the deceased, and yet more public, visible to all who pass by (Campbell). Cemeteries are set apart from their surroundings; the roadside memorial is, in contrast, usually in open view along a thoroughfare. In further contrast to cemeteries, which contain many relatively standardised gravesites, individual roadside memorials encapsulate and express not only the vivid grief of family and friends but also—when they include vehicle wreckage or personal artefacts from the fatal incident—provide concrete evidence of the trauma that occurred. While the majority of individuals interned in cemeteries are long dead, roadside memorials mark relatively contemporary deaths, some so recent that there may still be tyre marks, debris and bloodstains marking the scene.

In 2008, when I was regularly travelling this roadway, I documented, and researched, the six then extant memorial sites that marked the locations of ten fatalities from 1999 to 2006. (These were all still in place in mid-2014.) The fatal incidents are very diverse. While half involved trucks and/or road trains, at least three were single vehicle incidents, and the deceased ranged from 13 to 84 years of age. Excell argues that scholarship on roadside memorials should focus on “addressing the diversity of the material culture” (‘Contemporary Deathscapes’) and, in these terms, the Leichhardt Highway memorials vary from simple crosses to complex installations. All include crosses (mostly, but not exclusively, white), and almost all are inscribed with the name and birth/death dates of the deceased. Most include flowers or other plants (sometimes fresh but more often plastic), but sometimes also a range of relics from the crash and/or personal artefacts.

These are, thus, unsettling sights, not least in the striking contrast they provide with the highway and surrounding road reserve. The specific location is a key component of their ability to re-sensitise viewers to the dangers of the route they are travelling. The first memorial travelling northwards, for instance, is situated at the very point at which the highway begins, some 18 kilometres from Goondiwindi. Two small white crosses decorated with plastic flowers are set poignantly close together. The inscriptions can also function as a means of mobilising connection with these dead strangers—a way of building Secomb’s “haunted community”, whereby community in the post-colonial age can only be built once past “murderous death” (131) is acknowledged. This memorial is inscribed with “Cec Hann 06 / A Good Bloke / A Good hoarseman [sic]” and “Pat Hann / A Good Woman” to tragically commemorate the deaths of an 84-year-old man and his 79-year-old wife from South Australia who died in the early afternoon of 5 June 2006 when their Ford Falcon, towing a caravan, pulled onto the highway and was hit by a prime mover pulling two trailers (Queensland Police, ‘Double Fatality’; Jones, and McColl).

Further north along the highway are two memorials marking the most inexplicable of road deaths: the single vehicle fatality (Connolly, Cullen, and McTigue). Darren Ammenhauser, aged 29, is remembered with a single white cross with flowers and plaque attached to a post, inscribed hopefully, “Darren Ammenhauser 1971-2000 At Rest.” Further again, at Billa Billa Creek, a beautifully crafted metal cross attached to a fence is inscribed with the text, “Kenneth J. Forrester / RIP Jack / 21.10.25 – 27.4.05” marking the death of the 79-year-old driver whose vehicle veered off the highway to collide with a culvert on the creek. It was reported that the vehicle rolled over several times before coming to rest on its wheels and that Forrester was dead when the police arrived (Queensland Police, ‘Fatal Traffic Incident’).

More complex memorials recollect both single and multiple deaths. One, set on both sides of the road, maps the physical trajectory of the fatal smash. This memorial comprises white crosses on both sides of road, attached to a tree on one side, and a number of ancillary sites including damaged tyres with crosses placed inside them on both sides of the road. Simple inscriptions relay the inability of such words to express real grief: “Gary (Gazza) Stevens / Sadly missed” and “Gary (Gazza) Stevens / Sadly missed / Forever in our hearts.” The oldest and most complex memorial on the route, commemorating the death of four individuals on

18 June 1999, is also situated on both sides of the road, marking the collision of two vehicles travelling in opposite directions. One memorial to a 62-year-old man comprises a cross with flowers, personal and automotive relics, and a plaque set inside a wooden fence and simply inscribed "John Henry Keenan / 23-11-1936-18-06-1999". The second memorial contains three white crosses set side-by-side, together with flowers and relics, and reveals that members of three generations of the same family died at this location: "Raymond Campbell 'Butch' / 26-3-67-18-6-99" (32 years of age), "Lorraine Margaret Campbell 'Lloydie' / 29-11-46-18-6-99" (53 years), and "Raymond Jon Campbell RJ / 28-1-86-18-6-99" (13 years).

The final memorial on this stretch of highway is dedicated to Jason John Zupp of Toowoomba who died two weeks before Christmas 2005. This consists of a white cross, decorated with flowers and inscribed: "Jason John Zupp / Loved & missed by all"—a phrase echoed in his newspaper obituary. The police media statement noted that, "at 11.24pm a prime mover carrying four empty trailers [stacked two high] has rolled on the Leichhardt Highway 17km north of Taroom" (Queensland Police, 'Fatal Truck Accident'). The roadside memorial was placed alongside a ditch on a straight stretch of road where the body was found. The coroner's report adds the following chilling information: "Mr Zupp was thrown out of the cabin and his body was found near the cabin. There is no evidence whatsoever that he had applied the brakes or in any way tried to prevent the crash ... Jason was not wearing his seatbelt" (Cornack 5, 6). Cornack also remarked the truck was over length, the brakes had not been properly adjusted, and the trip that Zupp had undertaken could not be lawfully completed according to fatigue management regulations then in place (8).

Although poignant and highly visible due to these memorials, these deaths form a small part of Australia's road toll, and underscore our ambivalent relationship with the automobile, where road death is accepted as a necessary side-effect of the freedom of movement the technology offers (Ladd). These memorials thus animate highways as Gothic landscapes due to the "multifaceted" (Haider 56) nature of the fear, terror and horror their acknowledgement can bring. Since 1981, there have been, for instance, between some 1,600 and 3,300 road deaths each year in Australia and, while there is evidence of a long term downward trend, the number of deaths per annum has not changed markedly since 1991 (DITRDLG 1, 2), and has risen in some years since then. The U.S.A. marked its millionth road death in 1951 (Ladd) along the way to over 3,000,000 during the 20th century (Advocates). These deaths are far reaching, with U.K. research suggesting that each death there leaves an average of 6 people significantly affected, and that there are some 10 to 20 per cent of mourners who experience more complicated grief and longer term negative affects during this difficult time ('Pathways Through Grief').

As the placing of roadside memorials has become a common occurrence the world over (Klaassens, Groote, and Vanclay; Grider; Cohen), these are now considered, in MacConville's opinion, not only "an appropriate, but also an expected response to tragedy". Hockey and Draper have explored the therapeutic value of the maintenance of "'continuing bonds' between the living and the dead" (3). This is, however, only one explanation for the reasons that individuals erect roadside memorials with research suggesting roadside memorials perform two main purposes in their linking of the past with the present—as not only sites of grieving and remembrance, but also of warning (Hartig, and Dunn; Everett; Excell, *Roadside Memorials*; MacConville). Clark adds that by "localis[ing] and personalis[ing] the road dead," roadside memorials raise the profile of road trauma by connecting the emotionless statistics of road death directly to individual tragedy. They, thus, transform the highway into not only into a site of past horror, but one in which pain and terror could still happen, and happen at any moment.

Despite their increasing commonality and their recognition as cultural artefacts, these memorials thus occupy "an uncomfortable place" both in terms of public policy and for some individuals (Lowe). While in some states of the U.S.A. and in Ireland the erection of such memorials is facilitated by local authorities as components of road safety campaigns, in the U.K. there appears to be "a growing official opposition to the erection of memorials" (MacConville). Criticism has focused on the dangers (of distraction and obstruction) these

structures pose to passing traffic and pedestrians, while others protest their erection on aesthetic grounds and even claim memorials can lower property values (Everett). While many ascertain a sense of hope and purpose in the physical act of creating such shrines (see, for instance, Grider; Davies), they form an uncanny presence along the highway and can provide dangerous psychological territory for the viewer (Brien). Alongside the townships, tourist sites, motels, and petrol stations vying to attract customers, they stain the roadway with the unmistakable sign that a violent death has happened—bringing death, and the dead, to the fore as a component of these journeys, and destabilising prominent cultural narratives of technological progress and safety (Richter, Barach, Ben-Michael, and Berman).

Conclusion

This investigation has followed Goddu who proposes that a Gothic text “registers its culture’s contradictions” (3) and, in profiling these memorials as “intimately connected to the culture that produces them” (Goddu 3) has proposed memorials as Gothic artefacts that can both disturb and reveal. Roadside memorials are, indeed, so loaded with emotional content that their close contemplation can be traumatising (Brien), yet they are inescapable while navigating the roadway. Part of their power resides in their ability to re-animate those persons killed in these violent in the minds of those viewing these memorials. In this way, these individuals are reincarnated as ghostly presences along the highway, forming channels via which the traveller can not only make human contact with the dead, but also come to recognise and ponder their own sense of mortality.

While roadside memorials are thus like civic war memorials in bringing untimely death to the forefront of public view, roadside memorials provide a much more raw expression of the chaotic, anarchic and traumatic moment that separates the world of the living from that of the dead. While traditional memorials—such as those dedicated by, and to, Leichhardt—moreover, pay homage to the vitality of the lives of those they commemorate, roadside memorials not only acknowledge the alarming circumstances of unexpected death but also stand testament to the power of the paradox of the incontrovertibility of sudden death versus our lack of ability to postpone it. In this way, further research into these and other examples of Gothic memorialising practice has much to offer various areas of cultural study in Australia.

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