

LOST TO WORLDS

ANNE FERRAN

1. They say the stone walls used to muffle sound from the outside. Now sounds can float in on a breath of air, and hang in the yard. From somewhere on the hill behind a woman's voice summons her child. Birds call, cars pass, a telephone rings ...

2. So little here. Four walls. Some stone seats. The memorial sculpture. Uneven grass, patches of concrete. A concrete platform in one corner and a floor scoured with huge circular brush marks. On the platform a row of smaller circles. We're talking the recent past here, not convict. Scattered flowers among the grass – tiny purple flowers, yellow ones.

3. Along the base of the wall a crust of small things – fragments of stone, flakes of lime, scraps of wood. This wall is crumbling. It's thick and soft, biscuit-like. Loose pieces of stone and wood lift out at a touch. Patches of plaster curl at the edges, ready to come away. Underneath the plaster more dust and crumbled stone, like a skin barely able to hold

its contents. The tiny insects tracking the wall are like fleas on an animal's coat.

4. It's a roughly built wall, with no beauty in it or care. Made with whatever stones came to hand. Openings sealed with grey concrete blocks, a few with rosy convict bricks. Only the old bricks suggest beauty. Everything else is functional, adequate, crude. Has someone worked their way around the wall with lashings of cement, like icing, trying to stop the slow disintegration?

5. A wall, permanently attending. Watching everything that happens: labour, punishment, flashes of spirit, austerity, silence, endurance, cold, hunger, confinement ... release, affliction, despair.



6. In 1827 Governor Arthur chose the Cascades site in South Hobart for a Female Factory and set about converting the buildings to house female convicts. Next to the Hobart Rivulet, surrounded and overshadowed by high hills, it was a cold, sunless place – and damp, especially in winter. The women moved there at the end of 1828. The Factory at Ross in the Midlands came later. Smaller and better situated from the point of view of health, it operated for only six years, between 1848 and 1854.

7. Both Female Factories housed three classes of female convict – First Class, Second Class and Third or Crime Class. Possibly the hardest work was at the wash tubs, standing all day on cold stone floors, with the arms constantly immersed in water. All the washing was done by women at the bottom of the ladder, in the Crime Class.

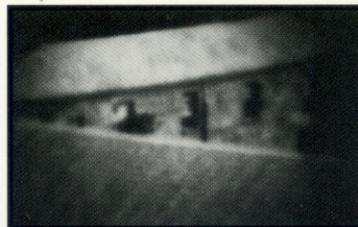
8. Any misconduct by a female convict could bring a sentence in the factories. Women who became pregnant automatically served six months in the Crime Class. At the Cascades

the babies, weaned too early and reared in the overcrowded, unhygienic nursery, died – hundreds in the 1830s alone.

9. It can feel like everything that ever happened here still has a place. In the crevices in the wall, the ones that keep opening, or behind the overlays of plaster and paint. If not there, then in the air; the high streaming clouds; or somewhere on the hills that overlook the yard.



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10. At 6.30 in the morning, in the bitter cold, there's already light in the sky. The clouds – long ribbons – are first pink, then yellow; the sun catches the top of Mt Wellington; all the birds that flew east in the afternoon now fly back towards the mountain. The west wall is blotched by the shadows of trees on the hill. On the north wall there is no sun at all. It stands in shadow all day and it's not even winter yet.

11. At Ross the ground is dry. There's been a drought. Sheep have gnawed the grass to the roots. Without the grass to hide them the scattered stones seem bigger and more plentiful. After a while a weak sun comes out, making the stubble glow.

12. At first there's almost nothing to see. A stone wall enclosing an empty yard, a paddock with an oddly uneven surface. Abstract like a painting, a picture pared to the bare essentials. The wall and the ground, flat surfaces, vertical, horizontal. You struggle to make sense of what you see, to grasp it.

Nothing stands out enough to take hold of – no stair or cellar, or fence or path, not even a tree. It all looks the same.

13. It's only partly about the women and children. It's looking up to find another middle-aged couple stopped where the sign marks the entrance to the factory; seeing them as they wander around the cottage, close enough for their voices to carry but not close enough to make out the words.



14. I met a man who had worked on the dig at Ross. He told me that every tiny object they took from the trench would leave its own perfect negative impression in the ground. He seemed more affected by the memory of these imprints – so perfectly formed, so soon destroyed – than by any thing they found there.

15. The bodies. Until 1876 women and children who died in the Cascades Factory were buried in unmarked graves just outside the walls. I read of people digging in their gardens, in the place where the cemetery used to be, still occasionally turning up bones in the soil.

16. Some things taken from the ground at Ross: sewing pins, glass beads, slate fragments, pencil fragments, aboriginal stone flakes, uniform buttons, ceramic fragments, bottle glass fragments, animal bones, brick fragments, nails, window glass fragments, clay pipe fragments, coins, merchant tokens, pieces of decayed timber, seeds, pieces of leather.

17. I saw these things in the museum. So tiny, their even-tinier accession numbers painstakingly applied in black paint. So many, with nothing but the boxes and bags holding them to give them meaning. I tried to think where I'd seen things smaller, more pulverised, closer to disintegration. Bag after bag perforated with holes that turned out to be made by the tiny bones inside, their sharp, gnawed ends, their honeycombed, porous bodies ...



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IMAGES

- 01 Cascades Factory: section of wall
- 02 } From *Female House of Correction (after JW Beattie)*, 2000
- 03 } c-type photographs, 33.5 x 50.0cm, edition 5
- 04 Ross Factory: section of ground
- 05 marble
- 06 slate pencil
- 07 Cascades Factory: corner of wall

Original John Watt Beattie photographs
courtesy of Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Items from Ross archaeological collection
courtesy of Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery

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