



In Search of Fisher's Ghost

During an investigative tour Down Under, I was able to examine the persistent legend of "Australia's most famous ghost" (Davis 1998). I was generously assisted by magic historian Peter Rodgers with whom I shared several other adventures (Nickell 2001).

One writer has commented, "It is a mystery why some ghost stories catch the public's imagination and survive while others, often more shocking and more credible, are forgotten" (Davis 1998). He cites the story about Frederick Fisher, which has been related in countless newspaper articles, as well as poems, songs, books, plays, an opera, and other venues (Davis 1998) and provided the inspiration for a movie (Fowler 1991). It once attracted the attention of notables like Charles Dickens, who published a version in his magazine *Household Words*, and entertainer John Pepper, who used it as the subject of one of his "Pepper's ghost" stage illusions in Sydney ca. 1879 ("Illusionist" 1984). Today, Fisher's ghost remains the subject of an annual festival. All this—even though the ghost reportedly appeared "to just one man on one occasion" long ago (Davis 1998).

The story began June 17, 1826, with

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the disappearance of Frederick Fisher. Fisher was a "ticket-of-leave man"—a paroled convict—who had acquired land at Campbelltown where he built a shack. Unfortunately he also caroused there with itinerants and other ticket-of-leave men including his neighbor and best friend George Worrell (or Worrall). When Fisher found himself in debt and facing possible arrest, he trustingly signed his property over to Worrell—either to conceal or to protect his assets. But when Fisher was released from prison after six months and returned to his farm, he found Worrell had been claiming it as his own.

After Fisher disappeared, Worrell resumed possession of the property, telling anyone who inquired that his friend had returned to England in search of his estranged family. The fact that Worrell wore Fisher's clothes and—to prove his ownership of one of Fisher's horses—offered a crudely forged receipt soon raised suspicions.

On September 23 the Colonial Secretary's Office offered a reward for "the discovery of the body" of Frederick Fisher, or a lesser reward for proof that he had "quitted the Colony" ("Supposed Murder" 1826). Subsequently, a local man named James Farley reportedly had an encounter with the ghost of Fisher. Farley was walking near Fisher's property one night and saw an apparition of the missing man sitting on a fence, glowing

eerily and dripping blood from a gashed head. Moaning, the phantasm "pointed a bony finger in the direction of the creek that flowed behind Fisher's farm" (Davis 1998). Thus prompted to search the area, police soon dug up Fisher's corpse. Worrell was convicted of the murder and reportedly confessed just before his hanging (Fowler 1991, 13).

Such are the main outlines of the story. Queensland writer Richard Davis observes in his book *The Ghost Guide to Australia* (1998), "From the beginning distortions occurred—almost every aspect of the story was changed and romanticised so that truth became indistinguishable from fiction." Indeed, the version published by Charles Dickens ("Fisher's Ghost" 1853) contains numerous altered details—"Penrith" for Campbelltown, "Smith" for Worrell, etc.—that link it to a fictionalized account written by Australian writer John Lang (n.d.).

Those promoting the tale cite an alleged deathbed statement by the recipient James Farley (or "John Hurley" in the earliest versions [Cranfield 1963]). Queried about the matter on his deathbed, Farley supposedly raised himself on an elbow and told his friend: "I'm a dying man, Mr. Chisholm. I'll speak only the truth. I saw that ghost as plainly as I see you now" (Davis 1998; Cusack 1967, 3). Alas, the story is not only unverified but has a suspiciously literary quality about it.

In fairness it should be acknowledged that debunkers have offered their share of doubtful claims as well. One purported explanation for the ghost was given by a seventy-three-year-old barber. He said he heard it from his grandfather who in turn allegedly learned it from an ex-convict who had secretly witnessed the murder and burial. Wanting to expose the truth but afraid of being implicated, he hit on a plan. He fashioned a pair of cloaks—one white, another black—wearing the first at night to simulate the ghost. When some traveler happened by, he moaned and pointed to the burial site in the swamp. Then readying the black cloak as he walked toward that spot, he would suddenly pull it over him so that “to the terrified onlooker it seemed that the ghost had suddenly disappeared.” Supposedly this repeated ruse brought the desired result and the corpse was searched for and discovered—believe it or not! (“Ghost” 1955)

Another hand-me-down tale was related by a seventy-four-year-old resident. He said that Farley simply “saw a man whom he took to be Fisher (but it was not Fisher) sitting on the rail of the bridge.” When the man “dropped from the rail of the bridge apparently into the weeds” and so seemed to vanish, “Farley thought it must have been a ghost on account of the sudden disappearance” (Lee 1963). While such an incident could happen, there is no good evidence that it did.

Not surprisingly, those inclined to dismiss ghost stories have suggested the tale was simply a journalistic invention. One writer has stated that “there can be little doubt that it was a hoax first published by a Sydney magazine” (Cranfield 1963). In fact, however, that account—in the March 1, 1836, *Teggs Monthly*—was preceded by an anonymous poem published years earlier (September 1832) in *Hill’s Life in New South Wales*. Titled “The Spirit of the Creek,” it bore a prefatory note that it was based on the murder of “poor F*****” at

Campbelltown. It is important to note that this was a creative production. Not only was *Hill’s Life* a literary paper and the narrative written in verse (thus inviting “poetic license”), but the story was actually fictionalized. For example, Fred Fisher became a rich ex-convict named “Fredro” and the murderer Worrell was represented as “Wurlow” (Fowler 1991, 15).

To assess the credibility of the Fisher’s ghost story, it is necessary to go back in time, as it were, to the February 2, 1827, proceedings of the Supreme Criminal Court (“Supreme” 1827). As



An artist’s impression of the appearance of Fisher’s Ghost beckoning to a resident named Farley, in 1826.

others have previously noted (e.g., Cranfield 1963), the trial records make absolutely no mention of a ghost. In addition to this negative evidence, I was struck by the positive evidence in the proceedings that Fisher’s missing body had actually been located in a rational rather than supernatural manner. Constable George Looland testified that, on the previous October 20, blood found on several fence rails at the corner of Fisher’s paddock led him to search the area. He was assisted by two aboriginal trackers who soon reported traces they thought was “the fat of a white man” (presumably human tissue) floating on the creek. Proceeding on, they came to a spot (apparently identified by a disturbance of the marshy area) which they probed with an iron rod. One of the trackers “called out that there was something there,” and a spade was procured to excavate the site. Soon the search

party had uncovered the “left hand of a man lying on his side.” The coroner was summoned, and (the next morning) the body of Fisher was exhumed and examined, whereupon “several fractures were found in the head” (“Supreme” 1827).

However the story of Fisher’s ghost was actually launched—and it may have originated with the previously mentioned anonymous poem in 1832—the legend has persisted. In the narrative the phantom behaves as one of those purposeful spirits of yore who sometimes “advised where their bodies might be discovered” (Finucane 1984, 194). Folklorists recognize such tales as types of *supernatural legends*—that is, “supposedly factual accounts of occurrences and experiences which seem to validate superstitions” (Brunvand 1978).

Evidence of folklore in progress is quite evident. Numerous variations in the tale (apart from the fictionalizing process) are suggestive of oral transmission. Consider a specific example. Since at least the 1950s lighthearted vigils for the ghost have been held, with crowds typically gathering at midnight on June 17. The chosen site is the bridge across Fisher’s Ghost Creek because, according to one account, “it was on the rail of the bridge . . . that Fisher’s Ghost was always seen” (“Fisher’s Ghost” 1957). But when Peter Rodgers and I made our pilgrimage to the spot, locals told us (and other sources confirmed) that the original bridge was not in precisely the same place. More significantly, the earliest accounts of the story have the ghost sitting on the rail of a *fence*. With that simple transformation of a *motif* (as folklorists term a narrative element)—from fence rail to bridge rail—the *site* of the purported apparition also became translocated. Nevertheless, “ghost” sightings have been reported there, one of the most noteworthy of which

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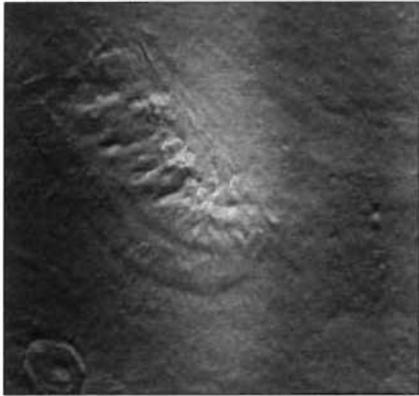


Figure 2a. The "stretched" Mars Global Surveyor image (used in the original article).



Figure 2b. NASA's rectified/unstretched version.

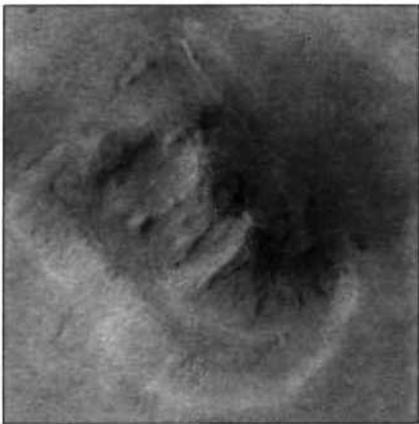


Figure 3a. NASA's "light reversed" image of the MGS photo.



Figure 3b. Graphic artist Mark Kelly's so-called "properly processed and ortho-rectified version" of the same image.

occurred in 1955 when "a white cow in the distance in the pitch darkness gave some onlookers a scare" ("Fisher's Ghost" 1957).

Clearly the story of Fisher's ghost has many of the elements that make a tale worth telling—and retelling: an historical basis, intrigue and murder, a quest for justice, and a spine-tingling resolution. Not surprisingly, the "ghost" seems to have taken on a life of its own.

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to clarify the record, though I wonder what part of the quote Hoagland could possibly find disagreement with.

And Bara decries my admittedly ridiculous "earthlings—from our own future" reference (re: the possible architects of the "Face") as a "blatant attempt to put words in [Hoagland's] mouth." I didn't ascribe my nutty idea to Hoagland, but little did I know at the time (nor does Bara's complaint hint at) how close I had actually come to Hoagland's current view—if only I had instead said "our own past." The following is verbatim from Richard Hoagland's appearance on Mike Siegel's (Art Bell's) *Coast to Coast A.M.* radio program from the night/morning of November 17/18, 2000:

The model that I am most comfortable with now is that the human race is a lot older—a lot more extraordinary—than we have ever been told. And the fact [is] that we once used to live all over the solar system—that the extraterrestrials are *our* guys. *We're* the guys that built the stuff on Mars . . .

and the stuff that we think we are now seeing on [our own Moon and on] the moons of Jupiter. . . . There is so much that we are now getting glimmers of. . . . [My next book] is going to be called *The Heritage of Mars: Remembering Forever*, because my thesis now, based on almost twenty years of doing this [research] . . . is "history is not as we've been told." . . . It has been carefully manipulated so we are not allowed to see this breathtaking heritage, because it would not benefit a few who are in control . . . and who want us to live this diminished existence not knowing who we really are because, frankly, it would threaten the power structure.

Two additional clarifications: A reader has informed me that the split between Hoagland and Chuck Harder was not permanent, and that Hoagland has been a frequent guest on Harder's radio program during the past few years. I have also learned that NASA's Lewis Research Center was renamed some time ago in honor of John Glenn. □