

"Civilizing Nature" in Australian Painting

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ABSTRACT

In Australian paintings and literary works of the colonial period, the wilderness and the Aboriginal people were represented as natural hurdles to be crossed and overcome, elements to be struggled against by the colonists who were attempting to "appropriate the environment exclusively to a British agenda of 'civilization'." [1] This is manifestation of the Darwinian evolutionary rhetoric, the idea that societies progress from hunter-gatherer to Western industrialism in a linear hierarchy. This theme is prevalent in paintings and literature. Establishing this narrative was of paramount importance to the white settlers. It can be seen principally in the motif of "civilizing nature", in which depictions of labour (images of the actual work of taming the wild landscape) or leisure (images of this work completed in the idyllic landscape) are stressed. This motif plays out the colonial agenda of celebrating masculine control over natural forces.

Key Words: Australian Painting, civilization, nature.

INTRODUCTION

Australian white history is primarily a colonial history of land settlement. The historian Hancock calls it a "history of progressive mastery". In his *Australia*, the idea of the land, signified as a body to be conquered and civilized by man, is a central preoccupation, one which first emerged in colonial conquest and the Western appropriation of foreign lands.[2] This concept of "man mastering nature" originates in the dualism between humanity and nature, which itself originated in ancient Greek philosophy and Christian dogma. This dualism developed in the process of modernity and European expansion. The Darwinian view of nature in terms of "the survival of the fittest" reinforced this concept. It turned history into a series of lessons which espoused a long ascent from chaos to managerial control of a nature. Since nature was indeed in "a fallen state", then civilization was a necessary moral check upon it. [3] Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) supported Darwin. In 1893, he delivered the pronouncement that: "Social progress...means a checking of the cosmic process at every step" [4]. This motif can be found in Australian Painting and Literature of the colonial period.

THE SUBJECTS OF LABOUR AND LEISURE

The civilizing of nature can be found in both subjects of labour and leisure. John Glover's *My Harvest Home* (1835) (Fig.1) is an example of the celebration of the Europeans' successful cultivation of the land and of their victory over nature and the Aborigines. The painting depicts the labour of gathering in the wheat harvest: a loaded cart and the six oxen that pull it are complemented by six working farmers in various occupations. There is not a single Aboriginal person in this painting. The picture can be read as a celebration on several levels. First, it

celebrates the harvest in an agricultural society. Second, it celebrates Glover's own triumph as an emigrant farmer. Third, it celebrates the displacement of local Aboriginal people.[5] All three celebrations implied white "progress". In von Guerard's painting *Glenara* (also known as *Mr Clarke's Station, Deep Creek near Keilor*) (1867), the subject is the wealth that the pastures have produced, and the central idea conveyed is that of civilization in the bush. The carefully delineated geometric gardens, the European trees and flowers, the vineyard and the comfortable homestead all convey the idea of prosperity. Von Guerard emphasized European labour by dotting labourers everywhere and depicting men tending vines, caring for the gardens, and transporting products. In this latter painting we see that it is through labour that harmony and control are achieved. This harmony is expressed "not only in the order of the landscape but in the leisure provided by the image of Clarke and his wife playing with their children on the verandah of their home. They represent the rewards of work and the leisure that owners naturally deserved".[6]

Sometimes hard labour is not directly represented, but hints are given of the result or reward of labour. The land is shown as settled, ordered and owned by the white settlers as a sign of "progress". For example, in Joseph Lycett's (c.1774-c.1825) *Woolloomooloo* (c.1822) (Fig.2), the landscape is represented as settled and owned by Europeans who are represented as masters of this fertile land, which has now been cleared and controlled. In this land they are able to experience leisure, ease, comforts and luxuries. The dominating rocks are replaced by the grassy lawn presenting an easy environment for the strolling white couple. They are complemented by a group of Aborigines who seem to be unconcerned about losing their land to the new European proprietors.

John Lewin's (1770-1819) watercolor sketch *Macquarie River* (1815) is also an early example of this motif. In the cleared stretch of dry land, there is no suggestion of Aboriginal ownership. The successful dispossession of the land by the new white settlers is assumed and European intervention is represented through the results of labour. A thatched hut and animals grazing near loaded carts give the suggestion of occupation and arouse comfortable sensations in the mind of the spectator. [7] Von Guerard's homestead landscape paintings of 1856-1869, such as *Larra* (1857) (Fig.3), also demonstrate the successful clearing and private ownership of the land. By representing a seemingly empty space of vast stretches of pastoral land, completely cleared of forest for the purpose of grazing sheep and cattle, the artist emphasizes the symbolic power of domination. Glover's *Australian Landscape with Cattle: the Artist's Property, Patterdale* (c.1835) (Fig.4) and *Views of Mill's Plains, Van Diemen's Land* (c.1833) convey a similar message through their images of cattle grazing. They fall within the overall conceptual framework which portrays Australia as the land of sheep and cattle.

This kind of depiction suggests private ownership of the land. With the abandonment of the community of convicts as a long term basis for settlement, the promotion of Australia as a place of emigration was enhanced. With their emphasis on the control of the landscape through the depiction of leisure, these pastoral landscape paintings became a means by which Australia was advertised to the British population as a desirable destination. Since those who were to come would be free, the idea of private property was heavily promoted. [8]

Whether pastoral activity is depicted as labour or leisure, these images embody the European control over Australian nature through labour, and the leisure that such control provides.

Although sometimes the relationship between man and nature is harmonious without any emphasis on labour, it is a “progressive” harmony. In colonial Australia pastoral land use was a metaphor for civilization and progress. William Charles Wentworth (1790-1872), an Australian poet and politician, describes this as a process by which “an endless variety of hill and dale clothed in the most luxuriant herbage and covered with bleating flocks and lowing herds” is seen to “indicate that you are in regions fit to be inhabited by civilized man”. [9] This is one of the earliest expressions of the relationship between pastoralism and civilization in Australian literature. This “progressive” harmony is not based on the equality or oneness of humanity and nature, but is founded on the context of work performed in a natural environment in which the indigenous people have been expelled from the land. Although work is not directly represented, the idea of work is implied by representing the results of that work. Pastoral land is thus regarded as the property and “reward” of the industrious European. The scene depicted is, after all, about the conversion of nature.

In these paintings, the value of European labour and the rewarding harvest that hard work brings are stressed. This is done with the intention of demonstrating the European agricultural transformation of the wilderness into “fertile” land, through labour, the successful clearing of the terrain, and the white control of the landscape, which was a result and embodiment of the settler culture. This provided a framework in which the European settlement and early settler capitalism were morally acceptable. The description of the introduction of European land management conveys the idea that “the adventurous and hardworking European makes productive what was unproductive land under the old management”. [10]

A WASTE LAND IN NEED OF EMIGRANT CULTIVATION

The image of a waste land in need of emigrant cultivation, and the idea of advancement through work, was an enduring theme in colonial Australian art and writing. The early Australian writer James F. Bennett’s (active 1841-43) prose and verse echo the paintings mentioned above. In his *Historical and Descriptive Account of South Australia Found on the Experience of Three Years in that Colony*, Bennett writes: “When he has surmounted the difficulties of a first settlement, he usually finds himself well repaid for what sufferings he may have endured”. He continues this theme: “the forest gives way to his axe – his flocks and herds increase rapidly – and he sees growing up around him, not only an abundance, but a superfluity of the ‘good things of life’”.

[11] These ideas are also expressed in his verse:

Then all around was heard the crash of trees –
 Trembling a while, then rushing to the ground –
 The low of ox, and shouts of men who fired
 The brushwood – or who tore the earth with ploughs; -
 The grain sprang thick and tall, and hid in green
 The blackened hillside – ranks of spiky maize
 Rose like a host embattled – the buck of wheat
 Whitened broad acres. Scenting with its flowers –
 The Autumn winds.[12]

In these lines nature is productive as the result of human labour. The suffering of nature caused by human behaviour – the “crash of trees” being felled and ploughing which “tore the earth” –

is justified morally through the new productivity and "fertility" . Bennett writes, "I have seen the plains and forests around Adelaide changed from their original desolation into a continued mass of farms – some thousands of acres bearing their first crops of wheat, maize and barley, while the more distant parts in which no track nor trace of human being could be found when first I rode through them, I ultimately saw sprinkled with sheep and cattle stations with occasionally a field of corn".[13] Bennett justifies the European occupation of the "new land" because this labour brings life to nature and creates prosperity and growth. Australian nature is seen as attractive only when it is "improved" by European settlers, often in order to look like the English countryside, and land is considered valuable only when it is productive.

This pioneering vision was backed by the deep-rooted attitudes toward nature especially the wilderness which existed in the European tradition. It was also backed by the value systems and environmental perceptions of Europe, where people had been clearing land for agriculture for over a thousand years and where an agrarian-industrial culture had developed. The moral responsibility of Europeans to improve the land (according to European methods) and to bring about its maximum productivity was based on the Christian doctrine that man should carry out God's intention of "improving" nature and make it fertile. Man should create prosperity through labour, because all of the earth was God's creation awaiting conversion into productive land through the work and labour of energetic Christians. The hunter-gatherer lifestyle of the Aboriginal people, which left the land in its original state, was regarded as nothing less than sinful. Indeed, it was thought to be the Christian moral duty of colonists to convert what seemed to be barren wastes to green pastures and fertile fields.

In modern times, these assumptions of "civilizing" nature were underpinned by scientific and capitalist attitudes, assisted by the four-stage theory of social evolution and appropriation of the land proposed by John Locke and later, in economic terms, by Adam Smith (1723-1790). The theory held that human societies naturally progressed through four developmental stages: hunting and gathering, pastoral, agricultural and commercial. White man aided the delivery of Australia into and beyond stage two. According to Australian writer James Collier (1846-1925): The Aborigine's inability to till the ground or even make use of its natural pasture...was the capital offence, and it was irredeemable...their disappearance was a natural necessity. It came about in obedience to a natural law. It was affected by natural process, and followed the lines of the substitution of vegetal and animal species all over the world". [14]

In this passage we can see the driving force of capitalism as supported by its myriad scientific and technical agencies. In this sense, the idea of "nature" in Australian culture was but an extension of the economic history of Europe, where capitalism had long since transformed "waste" land into productive agricultural land and turned idle nature to commercial profit. The perception of the new world as a land of profit was a means of distinguishing the invaders and immigrants from the natives they subordinated, expelled or exterminated.[15] Nature, here, provides a passive context and a terrain on which the white man battles for his rightful possession. The Enlightenment, the scientific, agricultural and industrial revolutions, the growth of capitalism and the rise of Western imperialism, all led to Europe's relentless quest for land, trade and profit. Scientific and technological advances made the wholesale exploitation of nature and natural resources both desired and feasible. At this point, the development of

technology “created a new intellectual milieu, and all phenomena of economics, politics and other cultural manifestations are situated within it”. [16]

] The thrust towards political and economic dominance was reinforced by the assumption that Europeans possessed the most progressive and advanced civilization that the world had ever known, and this in turn was supported by the scientific and technological achievements of that civilization. Science and technology as agents of civilization became a radical new way of perceiving the world and of organizing societies. By the 1890s, certain thinkers asserted that Europeans had right of access to the resources of backward areas, because those people were unable to make use of them.

“LABOUR AND PRODUCTIVE” NARRATIVE IN THE PAINTINGS OF HEIDELBERG GROUP

The most impressive expression of the “labour and production” narrative, strongly influenced by these ideas, can be found in the paintings of Heidelberg group during the period of Australian nationalism of the late 1880s and 1890s. It is especially present in the works of Tom Roberts. His paintings directly depicted pioneering labour. Roberts’ nationalistic paintings during this period deserve special attention, since these works went on to become icons of the Australian cultural identity. Roberts was regarded as having captured the nation’s imagination and seen as an influential creator of Australia’s self-image. He consciously set out to develop a national school of painting at a time when Australians were beginning to define themselves in terms of their relationship to the landscape. He participated eagerly in this effort toward self-discovery and self-definition and was largely responsible for the development of a vision of the landscape shared by his contemporaries in the second half of the 1880s.[17] He had a great influence on many later artists such as Elioth Gruner (1882-1939), Lloyd Rees (1895-1988), Fred Williams (1927-1982) and Arthur Boyd (1920-1999). They all acknowledged their artistic debt to him. Arthur Boyd even claimed that “all Australian paintings are in some ways a homage to Tom Roberts”. [18]

Roberts painted a group of interrelated images on this subject during this period, including *The Woodsplitters* (also known as *Charcoal Burners*) (1886) (Fig.5), *Turning the Soil* (1887) and *Twilight at Healesville* (1886-88). The landscape in these paintings becomes an arena for the labouring pioneer. *The Woodsplitters*, for example, represents charcoal-burners industriously working in a bush clearing, and an open landscape with stacks of well-cut wood. When looking at this painting, I am unable to feel the sense of “nostalgia for the disappearance of forest-workers” that Virginia Spate described.[19] Rather, in the emphasis on the cutting of the wood and the clearing of the bush, there is a manifest sense of pioneering progress. Spate argues that the absence of any signs of culture suggests that the man will be absorbed into the land that he had cleared.[20] But this painting, together with two oil sketches of the similar theme of wood getting and charcoal burning, can also be seen as celebrations of the “heroic” and “progressive” qualities of human labour, demonstrating masculine control over nature and the transformation of “unproductive” into “productive” land. A small group Australians who were conscious of conservation and environmental destruction in the 1870s and 1880s objected strongly to the desecration of the forests in the proximity of the Dandenongs.[21] Leigh Astbury’s argument that these pictures demonstrate nature’s abundance and Roberts’ reverence for nature seem improbable.[22] In its support of such human labour as wood splitting, timber cutting and upturning the “virgin soil”, Roberts’ painting can be interpreted,

rather, as an actual endorsement of the destruction of the bush, a sound proof of his pride in human "progress" and "civilization".

The prominent figures in Robert's landscape paintings are the conqueror, the civilizer and the shaper of nature. Roberts felt himself part of the imperial civilizing mission; he depicted the "strong masculine labour" that shaped nature and contributed to the wealth of Empire.[23] The women in his landscape paintings, such as those in *Slumbering Sea, Mentone* (1887) (Fig.6) which represents the leisure of middle-class bourgeois ladies, often play a civilizing role in the new society, through their elegance, refinement and their fostering of arts. Roberts seems to "have thought of his art as a means of contributing to social unity and to progress".[24] Although *Mentone* suggests a closer relationship between the figures and nature, in this painting the bourgeois ladies with their elegant and sophisticated costumes and manner represent the transplanting and displacement of European culture into an Australian environment. The red cliff suggests untamed and uncivilized nature, but the women stand for "the implacable forces of the imperial civilizing mission". [25]

It is true that in the colonial period Roberts also painted some leisurely pictures (such as *A Sunday afternoon picnic at Box Hill* (c.1886) (Fig.10) in which peaceful activities seem to represent the antithesis of labour. However, these paintings usually suggest not wild nature but rather the familiar bush cultivated by the civilizing hand of man. Some of Streeton's works also represent this kind of human harmony in the civilized landscape. For example, in *Twilight Pastoral* (also known as *Above us the Great Grave Sky*) (1890) (Fig.9), the soft tone, the beautiful and striking images of natural scenery and the lyrically quiet atmosphere convey the lyrical and poetic moods of nature. Instead of focusing on sheep and cattle and the circumstances around their production, in this painting Streeton depicts human intimacy with nature. Specifically this is achieved through the inclusion of a white couple lying together in the balmy open air and the romantic associations of the accompanying sunset. Nature is represented as a place of leisure. However, whether in Roberts's landscape of leisure or in Streeton's lyrical nature, the perspective is always a European one, assuming the European possession of the land and emphasizing the bourgeois recreation in Australia. Moreover, in these paintings nature is represented as managed and civilized, converted into a gentle land. As the business of the Heidelberg School was to paint the imagery of burgeoning white success, the sense of harmony in their painting was derived from ordered images of civilization.[26]

CONCLUSION

Whether the artist is emphasizing labour or leisure, there is no suggestion of Aboriginal ownership of the land. Usually there is minimal representation of Aboriginal people in this kind of Australian painting. Although black men and women were a part of the pastoral workforce, they are all absent in the canvasses of these pastoral painters. This is the case even though it is clear that in some parts of the outback, black labour dominated the industry. The Australian pastoral symbolized civilization and progress, and this narrative excluded Aboriginal people. The Aborigines could only be presented as united and in harmony with wild nature. They never civilized, managed, or controlled nature. Although Glover often depicted the harmony between the Aborigines and nature, there is an absence of Aboriginal people in most of his paintings about European farming of Australian land. In those pictures about the settlement of the land – those in which animals graze, watched over by shepherds, or those which take Patterdale's farmhouses as their subject – there is no sign of indigenous people at all. This separation of

Aboriginal and pastoral landscapes reinforces the idea of a pastoral landscape transformed and owned by white men.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig.1 John Glover (1767-1849). *My Harvest Home* (1835). Oil on canvas. 76 x 114 cm. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.



Fig.2 Joseph Lycett (c.1774-c.1825). *Woolloomooloo* (c.1822). Watercolour. 17.6 x 27.7cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Fig.3 Eugene von Guerard (1811-1901). *Larra* (1857). Oil on canvas. 35 x 55.9 cm. Private collection.



Fig.4 John Glover (1767-1849). *Australian Landscape with Cattle: the Artist's Property, Patterdale* (c.1835). Oil on canvas. 76.7 x 114.6 cm. National Library of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



Fig.5 Tom Roberts (1856-1931). *Woodsplitters* (also known as *Charcoal Burners*) (1886). Oil on canvas. 61.4 x 92.3 cm. Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Melbourne.



Fig.6 Tom Roberts (1856-1931). *Slumbering Sea, Mentone* (1887). Oil on canvas. 51.0 x 76.5 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Fig.7 Arthur Streeton (1867-1943). *Twilight Pastoral* (also known as *Above us the Great Grave Sky*) (1890). Oil on canvas. 68.3 x 35.4 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Fig.8 Tom Roberts (1856-1931). *A Sunday Afternoon Picnic at Box Hill* (c.1886). Oil on canvas. 38.6 x 28.7 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

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