

INSCRIBING CULTURE ON THE LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

For the early settlers of Van Diemen's Land the real horror of the landscape was its succession of absences. Not only were there so few people, but the settlers could find no history, no cultural context within which the land could be understood, no basis for interaction with it except in terms of hostility and brute conquest. The process of relating to the land imaginatively required the inscription of 'stories' to provide the place with unique cultural resonances. This paper considers five such attempts through literature, art and photography.

At first it was an ill-fitting, hand-me-down culture that was imposed on the land by means of comparisons, usually more ingenious than obvious, with the established cultural norms of Europe and Britain. In terms of art, the fashion for the Picturesque largely determined what settlers expected to see—and elicited their disappointment when they failed to find it.

In opposition to this imitative process was a fascination with difference for its own sake, and the way this threw old assumptions into question. This process began with examinations of the unique flora of Van Diemen's Land, and spread gradually to the landforms.

Frontier stories offered the triumphalist celebration of cultural heroes and, in the process, vilified the land as the enemy that had to be overcome before the colonists could feel at home.

Tasmanian literature has been largely preoccupied with revisiting the past—a selective past that focuses on the treatment of the Palawa and the convict period and has perpetuated the malaise that haunted Tasmania. In these stories the land is co-villain, in league with an evil social structure to persecute the innocent and reinforce the communal infamy.

Finally, wilderness has been constructed as a unique and complete cultural tradition, providing an aesthetic, a morality, a religion, and a political ideology with new heroes and icons.

Introduction

How do we relate to the land? We can pass through it, live on it, manipulate it, exploit it and engage with it—commercially, pragmatically, aesthetically, spiritually. But compared with many cultures, our modern Western culture is impoverished in the ways it knows how to relate to the land. Almost certainly, though we cannot know for sure, the pre-invasion Palawa had a rich culture linking them to the land in story, song, dance and ritual. Although present-day Tasmanian Aborigines have preserved much of that culture, a great deal has been irretrievably lost. What do non-indigenous Tasmanians have instead?

The land of absences

To the early European settlers/invasers of Van Diemen's Land the real horror of the land was its succession of absences. Not only were there so few people (indigenous people and convicts did not qualify in the colonial assessment), but there was no history, no cultural context within which the land could be understood; no basis for interaction with it except in terms of hostility and brute conquest. Although this might have been regarded as the colony least dissimilar to Britain and Europe, the land was, for them, effectively without form and void: it could not be imagined. As surveyor James Calder succinctly put it in 1860:

[It] is as yet without a history, without traditions, and indeed almost without any association—Its past is a veritable blank and we look back into it only to discover that it has nothing to reveal (1860, p. 6).

Surveyors are not generally loquacious, and Calder was unusually taciturn, but the same could not be said for Scottish playwright David Burn. Yet he, too, felt inadequate to describe place without an accepted history.

It is a difficult task effectively to paint the scenery of a tenantless wilderness, where no land-marks, no spot of terror or renown, not even a shepherd's cot, is to be found to give an impress to the features, or give tangible hold, whereby succeeding tourists may call identical localities to immediate recognition ... whilst assiduously striving to impart variety and interest to the scene of our wanderings, I have frequently been led to fear the lack of human machinery may render the record monotonous and vague (1842, p. 38).

The notion that the land had no identity before the arrival of the Europeans; that it was pristine, straight from the hand of the Creator, or a Sleeping Beauty waiting to be awakened with the kiss of progress, was not politically innocent. Deliberately or not, those who voiced it were contributing to the doctrine of *terra nullius*. If it was a land of nothing it must also be a land of no-one—or no-one deserving of it. John Dunmore Lang, Sydney-based Presbyterian minister, historian and politician, was invited to preach at the opening of the Scots Church in Hobart's Bathurst Street in 1835. As he sailed up the Derwent he was moved to philosophise about the scene in a sonnet:

'Tis a most beauteous Strait! The great South Sea's
Proud waves keep holiday along its shore;
And as the good ship glides before the breeze
Broad bays and isles appear and steep cliffs hoar,
With groves on either hand of ancient trees
Planted by Nature in the days of yore;

Despite this natural beauty to the eye, Dunmore Lang felt a disturbing absence to the ear:

But all is still as death! Nor voice of man
Is heard, nor forest warbler's tuneful song.
It seems as if this beauteous world began
To be but yesterday, and th'earth still young
And unpossessed ...
Wild solitude
Reigns undisturbed along the voiceless shore,

And every tree seems standing as it stood
Five thousand years ago. The loud wave's roar
Were music in these wilds! The wise and good,
That wont of old as Hermits to adore
The God of nature in the desert [sic] drear,
Might sure have found a fit sojourning here! (1970, pp. 31–2)

We find a similar sentiment underlying the enthusiastic response of the Austrian Baron von Hügel to his first experience of rainforest:

Here in this primeval forest, in this realm of Creation locked away for so long from any man's tread, and surely one of the secret corners of Nature, there is an indescribable stillness and solitude. It is as if one were under a bell-jar, cut off from the outside world, not a single sound of which can penetrate this silence (1944, pp. 109–110).

The process of relating to Tasmania imaginatively required a context and the inscription of 'stories' or narratives to provide the place with unique cultural resonances. What could they be? This paper considers five such attempts through literature, art and photography.

Story one: imprinting Europe

For the nineteenth-century visitors and immigrants the inevitable comparison was with 'home'. If the new land supplied similarities it was applauded; if not it was, in most cases, found wanting. In terms of resemblances to 'home', Tasmania scored brilliantly compared with the other States.

English novelist Anthony Trollope declared that if he had to live anywhere in the world other than England it would be Tasmania—where he would not be averse to being offered the post of Governor in the most attractive Government House in the Empire. His reasons hinge on the extreme 'Englishness' of the island.

It is acknowledged even by all the rival colonies that ... Tasmania is the prettiest ... Everything in Tasmania is more English than is England herself. She is full of English fruits, which grow certainly more plentifully and, as regards some, with greater excellence than they do in England. Tasmanian cherries beat those of Kent, – or, as I believe, of all the world, – and have become so common that it is often not worth the owner's while to pull them (1873, p. 37).

Louisa Anne Meredith was an English-born writer and artist who came to Van Diemen's Land in 1840 and later went on to a part-time career in tourist journalism. She contributed anonymously to the annual fact and statistics book *Walch's Almanac* fulsome descriptive essays designed to lure tourists from the other States. Her own illustrated book, *Our Island Home*, is written in similar style:

The little gardens ... with their great bushes of geraniums in bloom, were all full of sweet English spring flowers, looking happy and healthy, like the stout rosy children that everywhere reminded me of HOME; so different from the thick white complexions and tall slender forms so prevalent in New South Wales ... the mountains of the Freycinet Peninsula ... will assuredly become a favourite resort of visitors from

neighbouring colonies ... many will be the pallid cheeks and wasted forms which ... will find their fairest sanatorium in these glorious scenes (1879, pp. 22, 39).

Having ransacked Europe for geographical similes Meredith finally found them inadequate, and took refuge in the language of the Romantic sublime, heavily influenced by Byron:

I have heard the view of Hobart from the water compared to that of Genoa from the gulf; but ... I must candidly confess that the natural beauties of the capital of Tasmania are superior to those of its Italian rival ... the irregular outline of the estuary of the Derwent, with its jutting promontories, and background of swelling hills and mountains is, I imagine, perfectly unique; while the undulating surface of the city conduces immensely to its picturesqueness. And over all there looms the gigantic figure of the mountain, with its head in the clouds, and its feet in the sea, filling the eye with its vast proportions, and impressing the mind by its awful majesty. I can scarcely describe the feeling of mystery and grandeur excited by the disappearance of this imposing object from view, for hours and days together. Gathering around its massive head that impenetrable veil of clouds, it seems to withdraw itself in haughty isolation, or in individual self-communion from the world (1879, p. 9).

By contrast, acclaimed botanical artist Marianne North felt aggrieved that she had travelled to the other side of the world, only to find plants she could have observed at home:

The country was not in the least attractive to me; it was far too English, with hedges of sweet-briar, hawthorn, and blackberry, nettles, docks, thistles, dandelions: all the native flowers (if there were any) were burnt up (1893, p. 169).

The most complex exploration of the desire for a cultural context, and the need for literary associationism to provide it, was that of John Mitchel. A political activist of the Young Ireland Movement for independence from Britain, Mitchel was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1850. He was treated with all the diplomatic niceties, permitted to bring out his family and his library and allowed considerable liberty of person, so long as he remained within the designated parole area around Lake Sorell. Mitchel arrived determined to hate his prison, but found himself unable to hold out against its physical beauty.

... as we float here at our ease, we are willing to believe that no lake on earth is more beautiful than Sorell. Not so berhymed as Windermere is this Antarctic lake ... not so famous in story as Regillus or Thrasymere; in literature as Como or Geneva ... Why should not Lake Sorel [sic] also be famous? Where gleams and ripples purer, glassier water, mirroring a brighter sky ... And does the snow-white swan that 'On St Mary's Lake floats double, swan and shadow' – does he float more placidly, or fling on the waters a more graceful reflection from his stately neck than thou, jet black, proud-crested swan of the antarctic [sic] forest waters? Some sweet singer shall berhyme thee yet, beautiful lake of the woods ... every bay will have its romance ... and the glancing of thy sun-lit, moon-beloved ripples shall flash through the dreams of poets yet unborn (1853, pp. 71–2).

This lack of historical and literary reference to the European cultural tradition continued to be regarded as a major deficiency by writers, and was a major source of the malaise and sense of isolation that characterised the work of Tasmanian writers of the 1960s and 1970s. It was only overcome when Tasmanians, like Americans, came to value their natural heritage of wilderness.

Story two: valuing difference

Not all immigrants, and especially not short-term visitors, were obsessed with the need for similarity and recognition. *Their* stories of place focused on difference.

In April 1792 Admiral Bruni D'Entrecasteaux, in search of his colleague La Pérouse, brought his ships the *Recherche* and the *Espérance* to anchor in Recherche Bay. For five and a half weeks the French repaired and refurbished their ships and explored and charted the area. To D'Entrecasteaux this spot was idyllic, with trees 'as ancient as the world and ... so tightly interlaced that they are impenetrable'. Here is his interesting comment on the uniqueness of wilderness as the place where we see both vigour and decay:

It will be difficult to describe my feelings at the sight of this solitary harbour situated at the extremities of the world, so perfectly enclosed that one feels separated from the rest of the universe. Everything is influenced by the wilderness of the rugged landscape. With each step one encounters the beauties of unspoilt nature, with signs of decrepitude ... Nature, in all its vigour, and at the same time in decline, offers to the imagination something more imposing and picturesque than the sight of this same nature embellished by civilised man's industry. In wishing to conserve only its beauty, man has managed to destroy its charm, and ruin its exclusive character—the one of being always old, and always new (2001, p. 32).

At first the fascination with the new focused on the endemic flora of Van Diemen's Land, especially its tree ferns. Just before Baron von Hügel found himself in a bell jar of silence he extolled the immensity and the diversity of the rainforest:

Mighty trees rise to a height that I do not care to record, for my estimate would smack of exaggeration. Between and beneath these tall trees there is a second stratum of vegetation, an understory of trees perhaps fifty or sixty feet high and beneath these again, protected from sun, wind and rain, and drawing moisture constantly from the earth in which the springs arise, stand the majestic tree-ferns. Their trunks are covered with innumerable different varieties of small ferns and their fronds, from 10 to 12 feet long, stretch out horizontally like those of a palm ... The ground itself is covered with an infinite variety of mosses, small ferns and liverworts, revealing a new world to the wanderer (1944, p. 109).

However, it was artists John Skinner Prout, Simpkinson de Wesselow, John Glover, Knut Bull and later, our first Australian-born professional artist, William Charles Piguenit, who discovered other aspects of landscape that they could domesticate in terms of the prevailing artistic fashions of Europe—the Picturesque and the Romantic Sublime. In 1830, before leaving the scene of his artistic success in London, John Glover wrote to his patron, Sir Thomas Phillipps: 'I have at length determined to go to the Swan River New South Wales [sic] ... the expectation of finding a

new, beautiful world—new landscapes, new trees, new flowers, new animals, new birds etc, etc, is delightful to me’ (1830, p. 86). Glover’s geography underwent revision, but not his sentiments.

Unsurprisingly for one who regarded the artist Claude Lorrain as his model, Glover inscribed many of European cultural assumptions on the landscape, notably in his use of characteristics of the Picturesque (Hansen 2003a). However, what *is* surprising is that he also engaged in a two-way conversation, allowing the landscape to write its own unique signature on his paintings. This is particularly true of his paintings of the Palawa in the landscape. Many critics have decided that Glover is the arch-colonialist land-taker; that he insensitively paints Aborigines on land from which they have just been removed to serve the benefit of colonists like himself. I read these paintings differently, more in line with Glover’s own letters about his contact with the indigenous people. We know he was fascinated by aspects of their culture in a way that few if any of his contemporaries were (Sayers 1998). In the catalogue notes to *A Corroboree of Natives in Van Diemen’s Land* (1840) he wrote: ‘One seldome sees such gaiety in a Ball Room as amongst these untaught Savages’ (Hansen 2003b, p. 241). While designing the composition of *Aborigines Dancing at Brighton, Tasmania* (1835), the painting he was to send to George Augustus Robinson, he wrote: ‘I have already made up my mind to the subject—I wish to shew the Natives at a Corrobary [sic], under the wild woods of the country—to give an idea of the manner they enjoyed themselves before being disturbed by the White People and also to give an idea of the Scenery of the Country.’ Perhaps, in view of their contemporary suffering, he idealised their way of life, but he was also open to its possibilities, its value, and especially to what he perceived as the Aborigines’ close relationship with their land. His paintings of the Palawa show them returning from a successful hunting trip and being welcomed by the rest of their group, as in *The Last Muster of the Aborigines at Risdon* (1836); swimming, as in *Bath of Diana* (1837) and *Natives on the Ouse River, Van Diemen’s Land* (1838); diving for shellfish, as in *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point* (1834); and dancing, as in *Aborigines Dancing at Brighton, Tasmania* (1835) and his other Corroboree paintings. *The River Nile, Van Diemen’s Land, from Mr Glover’s Farm* (1837) specifically links the Aboriginal figures to Glover’s own property. The scene is one of tranquility, plentiful food supplies and the happy life that Glover associated with the Palawa. All these paintings depict a joyous relationship with the land that Glover (as a landowner and successful farmer who also derived much pleasure from the acculturation of English plants in his garden) himself emulated, in his own very different way.

I find a parallel dialogue between the old world and the new in Knud Bull’s paintings. Convicted of forgery and transported to Norfolk Island and later, Van Diemen’s Land, Bull had been deeply influenced by the great European Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. In Bull’s controversial painting *Entrance to the River Derwent from the Springs, Mount Wellington* (1856), we see something like a musical transposition of Friedrich’s *Morgenlicht*. The resulting ‘story’ enacts the exultation of Friedrich, for whom morning was an especially visionary time, and the darkness of Bull’s own struggle to break out of his convict situation.

Story three: frontier heroes

The master narrative of colonial cultures is the celebration of explorer heroes who subdue the land and domesticate it for the grateful settlers huddled round the coast. The American frontier epitomised such legendary heroes, but Britain also had its champions in Sir Richard Burton,

David Livingstone and Cecil Rhodes. The central deserts of Australia produced a new figure, the anti-hero: a succession of failed explorers who were lionised far beyond the few successful ones. 'Lost Leichhardt', Sturt, Burke and Wills became the heroes of Australian primary school history books. But who were Tasmania's heroic explorers? Few Tasmanians know of them, and even fewer from other States. Curr, Hellyer, Calder, the colourful Jorgen Jorgenson (self-styled King of Iceland) and many others were intrepid adventurers, encountering and surviving challenges equal to the desert wastes. Yet they had little impact on the colony's pantheon, even in their own time, because they were not public explorers. Rather than leading great expeditions that departed with pomp and panoply, they were surveyors in the public service or employees of the Van Diemen's Land Company, a London-based agriculture syndicate. The courage required to explore and map the central highlands and the western mountains may be imagined from Jorgenson's account of the terrain he and his party had to traverse:

The country before us was an entire scrub, but not impenetrable. In many parts deep gullies, but yet we imagined to reach Mt Dundas in spite of these difficulties. The place just under the mountain appeared to be perfectly clear, but we soon discovered our mistake in our descent, the Scrub even in the clearest places reached over our heads ... I now saw that we should have to cut our way through many miles of country. To do this would in common computation occupy 11 days at least, and then it is not certain whether between the two ranges we might not meet with similar or even greater obstacles (Binks 1989, pp. 75–6).

Henry Hellyer, foremost explorer of the VDL Company, had a similar story to tell. From his precarious position atop a ridge at the junction of the Arthur and the Hellyer Rivers, he described the scene as:

a highly dangerous, serpentine, strong and rocky ridge, so narrow at the top, that a single large tree would often occupy the whole width of it; and we were obliged to creep along its almost perpendicular sides to get past such a tree. It resembled the top of a wall of a large castle; and on either side below us was a rocky ravine many hundred yards deep (Binks 1989, p. 68).

Government surveyor James Calder's 1849 experience of the area around the Franklin River, now one of our most revered sacred sites, is conspicuously lacking in Romantic appreciation:

This locality [the Deception Range] presents no other view but that of a sterile wilderness, and scenes of frightful desolation. The great ravine, which borders Deception Range to the westward ... is a hideous defile ... A large and furious torrent flows through it, which collecting all the water that falls on a wide extent of mountainous country, emerges from the glen a large and beautiful river. I called it the Franklin ... The valley of the Acheron opens on a miserable plain ... producing neither a blade of grass, nor a particle of any useful herbage ... [and] bare, white-looking hills of unsurpassed sterility ... the picture is inconceivably forbidding and gloomy (1849, p. 424).

The lone prospectors who roamed the west coast in search of gold eventually initiated the mining boom of the 1890s and a new attempt to overlay a culture of success and progress on the dismal reputation of the area. The mining companies had good publicists: photographer John Watt Beattie and Marie Bjelke-Petersen, a novelist whom few people today have read but whose Tasmanian-set novels of the early 1900s were international best-sellers. In her novel *Dusk* (1924) the hero Kerrigan, the underground manager of the mine at Queenstown, was modelled on real-life Mount Lyell Mining Company manager Robert Sticht. Bjelke-Petersen did her research: she went to Queenstown and lived as rough a life, for a time, as her characters; she stood on the perilous mine haulage up to Lake Margaret, 600 metres above Queenstown, and rode on horseback to Savage River when there was certainly no road. For her the rainforest around Queenstown and the Gordon River carried a different message; it represented the power of nature to overcome socially sanctioned norms. To Kerrigan and the heroine Dusk Harland these are places of exhilarating psychosexual energy, and of fear at being not in control.

[A] riotous confusion of strong growing things, which clung savagely together and almost strangled each other in their fierce passionate embraces!

Cable-thick lianas wound around rotting tree-trunks, succulent vines sprawled insolently over grass, trees and ferns. There was a reckless profusion of green everywhere!

Kerrigan did not speak, he glanced out on the lawless loveliness of the landscape (1921, pp. 12–13).

Dusk is both attracted and repelled by the Gordon River:

[I]ts waters, though crystal-clear, were brown in shade, and ... below its satin-smooth gorgeously coloured surface there lurked abyssmal [sic] deeps, which stirred with forces that were as fierce, wild, and treacherous as the mighty powers lurking in the deep impenetrable jungle ... she stood watching the untamed loveliness of the scene, a loveliness which was not ethereal, vague, spiritual, but profuse, exotic and tropically sensuous (1921, p. 182).

Bjelke-Petersen had her explorer heroes too, even if they were heroines in disguise. In her novel *Jewelled Nights* (1923), handsome young osmiridium miner Dick, alias impoverished society girl Elaine Fleetwood, chooses to toil on the Savage River with a tough gang to repair the family fortunes rather than marry a rich suitor. *Jewelled Nights* was filmed in Queenstown in 1925 with Tasmanian actress Louise Lovely acting the part of Dick/Elaine.

The next wave of explorer heroes were the timber-cutters, or ‘piners’, of the west coast. Their efforts were exemplified by Barnes Able and Charlie Docherty, the first white people known to have followed the Gordon River and its tributary, the Serpentine, up to Lake Pedder; and by the Morrison brothers, who rowed and dragged their wooden punt and boxes and sacks of provisions up through the gorges of the Franklin River to the point where the Lyell Highway now crosses it. These heroic expeditions, conducted without today’s streamlined equipment, have been retold by Richard Flanagan in *A Terrible Beauty* (1985). Similarly, Simon Cubit (1987) has publicised the stories of the highland cattlemen, while Roger Scholes depicts the life of the snarers in his film

The Tale of Ruby Rose (1987). Nic Haygarth's *Baron Bischoff* (2004) is a biography of mineral prospector James 'Philosopher' Smith.

What do these frontier tales say about the land? Usually they are not about outright conquest, but qualified failure. Marie Pitt, married to a miner at Mount Magnet near Waratah and later at Mount Reade, turned to ballad-style poetry to express her experiences of the violent weather endured by these little isolated groups. 'West Coast Silhouette' is her most evocative recreation of the landscape and climate.

... a black Sou'wester screaming without,
Hard through the "horizontal" scrub ...
While the pine hut rocked like a ship at sea,
And the wall plates plucked at the ten-inch spikes
Bedded deep in the myrtle logs – ...
I hear the thresh of the spiteful hail,
And I feel the life of the wind beneath,
The forward heave and the lightning lurch
And the shuddering gap like a living thing,
As we crouched in the heel of the tempest's grip
High on the shoulder of Hamilton ...
What should you know of the spear of sleet
Stabbing the skin and pricking the veins,
And biting the bone as the axe-blade bites
To a mountain myrtle's shuddering heart?
Or the Fear that sleeps in his frozen lair
By the blasted crags of the nether pole,
The mad Sou'wester ... (1944, pp. 13–15).

Pitt's ballad 'The West Coasters', on the other hand, reflects the contemporary triumphalism associated with the clearing of the dense forests. The strong swinging rhythm and rousing chorus suggest a victory song over the slain pine, sassafras and myrtle that accurately revives nineteenth-century values, celebrating the heroism of men pitted against the forests.

From Emu Bay to Williamsford,
From Strahan to Dundas,
Through horizontal scrub they bored,
And quaking black morass.
Old Bischoff saw their camp-fires pass,
Mount Lyell saw them grow;
Tramping through the button-grass ...
Forty years ago!
Bleak winds flayed them as they strode,
The black frosts bit them sore,
But still The Road, The Open Road
Went singing on before;
And with them went a lightsome lass,

Adventure, face aglow,
Tramping through the button-grass ...
Forty years ago!
... They slew the pine and sassafras,
The myrtle host laid low,
Tramping through the button-grass ...
Forty years ago! (1944, pp. 99–100)

Yet despite these small victories the land is portrayed as ultimately victorious, usually because it is treacherous and malign. We still see the reiteration of this deeply incised story in modern writings about Tasmania's west coast. In Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide* (1994), the river triumphs; Aljaz drowns. He achieves apotheosis only by losing his identity in the layered history of place, of family, of ancestors, all the way back to the Palawa legends of the sea eagle. In Carmel Bird's Gothic novel *The Bluebird Café* (1990), the rainforest absorbs the fictional mining town of Copperfield, just as it had absorbed the symbolic lost child, Lovelygod Mean, seemingly without trace.

Because these 'heroes' of prospecting and pining are associated as closely with aspirations of conquest as with actual failure they are ambivalent heroes for today. They have been replaced by the new frontiersmen: nature photographers Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis and their successors, whose exploratory journeys are seen to be in the service of the land, not in its conquest.

Our new heroes are linked inextricably with the *cause* and *concept* of wilderness. Instead of subduing the frontier, they have 'discovered' it, even, in a sense, 'created' it, for our generation, since they have taught us to see it in a new way. Some died in the struggle against the 'forces of evil'—if not directly its victims, then as what the modern idiom would label collateral damage.

Story four: hating our history

Modern Tasmanian literature has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the past—a highly selective past that focuses on the convict period and perpetuates the malaise that haunted Tasmania for a century and a half. In the convict period there was a ready source of stories invoking and perpetuating shame and blame. Both convicts and the system that imprisoned them could provide endless examples that slid sideways to become engraved on the land itself. In these stories the land is co-villain, in league with, and mutually reinforcing, an evil social structure to persecute the relatively innocent and reinforce the communal infamy. In the last decades of the twentieth century the treatment of the Palawa was incorporated as well, to swell the refrain of an evil past that had left its indelible stain on the land. The implication of the land itself in this saga of ongoing evil was the joint invention of two middle-class nineteenth-century gentlemen who had never set foot on the west coast, but felt fully qualified to elaborate on the kiss of death that Nature had bestowed there:

- (i) Reverend John West, esteemed historian and passionate opponent of transportation;
and

- (ii) Marcus Clarke, journalist-turned-novelist and self-perceived convict of sorts, dispossessed of his expected family inheritance and packed off to Australia, like his hero Rufus Dawes.

For their own unacknowledged purposes each propounded a theory of a haunted, terrible land. ‘Sacred to the genius of torture, nature concurred with the objects of its separation from the rest of the world, to exhibit some notion of perfect misery’, thundered John West.

The torrents which pour down the mountains mingle with decayed vegetable matter, and impregnated with its acids discolour the water of the harbour; and the fish that approach the coast often rise on the waves and float poisoned to its shores (1852, pp. 181–2).

West’s vivid turn of phrase was accepted as fact by later writers: James Bonwick uses this passage almost verbatim in *The Bushrangers* (1856); Marcus Clarke embellished it even more in *His Natural Life* (1874); and Robert Hughes in turn adopted Clarke’s style in *The Fatal Shore* (1987). Here is Clarke pulling out all the stops to describe Macquarie Harbour on the west coast, a convict prison for violent recidivists who could not be trusted within striking distance of settler society.

Upon that dreary beach the rollers of the southern sea complete their circuit of the globe, and the storm that has devastated the Cape, and united in its eastern course with the icy blasts that sweep northward from the unknown terrors of the southern pole, crashes unchecked upon the Huon pine forests, and lashes with rain the grim front of Mount Direction. Furious gales and sudden tempests affright the natives of the coast ... The sea line is marked with wrecks. The sunken rocks are dismally named after the vessels they have destroyed ... All around breathes desolation; on the face of nature is stamped a perpetual frown (1874, pp. 83–4).

Clarke did not scruple to transfer the atmosphere, along with the prisoners, to the east coast, to Port Arthur. Wherever the penal system was in operation, the land that supported it was, *ipso facto*, equally tainted.

The south-east coast of Van Diemen’s Land ... resembles a biscuit at which rats have been nibbling. Eaten away by the continual action of the ocean which, pouring round by east and west, has divided the peninsula from the mainland of the Australasian continent ... the shore line is broken and ragged (1874, p. 81).

Clarke’s vivid, gothic descriptions became the raw material for later writers to embellish further, ignoring the errors of fact that they contained. The misanthropic Hal Porter was in his element, reviving Rufus Dawes in the person of Judas Griffin Vaneleigh in Porter’s 1960s novel *The Tilted Cross*.

Van Diemen’s Land, an ugly trinket suspended at the world’s discredited rump, was freezing ... Land and sky alike seemed repelled by the English and the half-cultured urbanity they had established on a solid foundation of political brutality, crime,

unemployment and colonial corruption ... Since it had been planted in perversity it had taken root and grown, a weed town, perverse and obverse (1961, pp. 9, 10).

Some forty years later in *Out of Ireland* Christopher Koch appropriated and amplified Porter's images of the Hobart Rivulet:

Here [the Hobart Rivulet], it seemed, was Hobart Town's cloaca. The black, oily water was stagnant and almost motionless, and every sort of filth floated in it ... This, I would discover, was the final destination of the soakage from the cess-pits at the Female Factory, far up-stream at the cascades [sic]; of many another cess-pit on the way; of wastes from factories along the banks; of refuse from the Government Hospital and of any other nastiness that people saw fit to drop into this Antipodean Styx. To the stench of the creek were added those of a slaughter-house, crouched on the opposite bank ... I struggled against the idea that the foul miasma of the place was settling on my flesh (1999, pp. 374–6).

It is no exaggeration to state that scarcely a novel set in Tasmania and written in the last thirty years or so fails to invoke the treatment of convicts and/or the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines in the nineteenth century; and of these scarcely any fails to incorporate escapee Alexander Pearce, self-confessed cannibal, or Truganini's betrothed with his hands cut off by wood-cutters and left to drown. Why? Horror has always been fashionable in fiction, believed to add that special depth of tragedy necessary to a 'great novel', but it is particularly seductive in a world of unsatisfying materialism and rationality. Indeed it seems to be difficult, almost impossible, for contemporary Tasmanian novelists *not* to include convicts and/or the nineteenth-century Aborigines as a ready-made source of the shocking.

Story five: privileging wilderness

Once a derogatory term indicating wasteland of no value, the word 'wilderness' has been recycled to mean a place of wild grandeur whose preservation is of supreme importance. The appreciation of wilderness has arisen in conjunction with a new consciousness about the environment as a unique and complete cultural tradition, providing an aesthetic, a morality, a religion, and a political ideology, with new heroes and icons. It has also become in effect another, insidious Land Rights issue insofar as there seems scant agreement about who has a right to visit wilderness; who, if anyone, may lay claim to it.

Visual images of the State's 'wilderness' have impacted so strongly on our personal concepts of Tasmania that we now privilege wild places in a way that would have been considered eccentric, if not mad, by most people even half a century ago. When we take photos we may include a few of friends and family but for the most part we carefully edit out people even if it means waiting with more or less patience until those annoying tourists move themselves out of our scene. We try to emulate Peter Dombrovskis and his successors by implying that this, our scene, is authentic wilderness. But why must it be empty of people? Why does wilderness now have so much kudos? What caused wilderness awareness?

Strange as it may seem to viewers of Scott Millwood's wonderful film *Wildness* (2003), Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis were not the first to appreciate and 'discover' Tasmania's

wilderness. Apart from the original Palawa, whose attitude we can only surmise, there were nineteenth-century Europeans who admired and even sought out what we now designate as wilderness. George Frankland, Surveyor-General of Tasmania amazed himself, one feels, by his passionate, Wordsworthian response to Lake St Clair. Here are extracts from his official report in 1835:

I will not dilate on the extreme beauty of the scenery as it might be considered out of place in an official Report, but I must confess that while narrating the circumstances of the journey, I feel inspired by the first discovery of such romantic Country, impressions which revive even in cold narrative.

I believe that every man in the party felt more [or] less the calm influence of this scenery and to all, this day's journey was a matter of recreation ...

The view from this point [Mt Olympus] was beyond all description, the whole of Lake St Clair lay at our feet with its beautiful bays and golden beaches, and in addition we could descry at least twenty other lakes of various dimensions in different parts of the panorama; two in particular attracted our especial notice and admiration by their beauty ... I named these lakes Petrarch and Laura (1954, p. 216).

This is certainly not the usual language of surveyors' reports. Frankland also made some sketches that captivated the artist John Skinner Prout, who wrote:

They so impressed me, revealing as they did glimpses of scenery full of natural grandeur, of unchecked wildness, and savage majesty, that from the moment my eye fell on them I determined the direction of my tour in search of the picturesque (1862, p. 275).

Prout took members of his *plein air* painting group there to see for themselves, and they were not disappointed. Rowing up the Lake, Prout was moved to write in his extravagant, jocular way:

Here, then ... we have at last reached a land of beauty such as the painter sees in his dreams and the poet sings in his verse. Of what need to go further my friends? Here let us cast anchor, and set up our tent. Let us send for our wives and our children, and relatives. Let us spend the rest of our days on this blissful shore (Brown 1985, p. 521).

William Piquenit also saw the Frankland drawings and determined to inveigle himself into a surveying expedition to make his own recordings. It is a great misfortune that Frankland's sketches, which had so much impact on other artists, have not been re-discovered.

In 1863 Morton Allport, an adventurous Hobart solicitor, took his new camera and a party of friends to Lake St Clair and produced 24 amazing stereoscopic photographs of the area, probably the earliest examples of Australian wilderness photography. Although intended primarily for family viewing with a hand-held stereoscope, they were also exhibited to advertise the beauty of the area in the context of a family outing. John Watt Beattie and Stephen Spurling III also photographed areas that we now label wilderness. Beattie's photos were used for the first landscape stamps issued anywhere in the world.

Piguenit's large canvases similarly had a great impact on his contemporaries, allowing them to see and reappraise the notion of the 'other' half of the State. His paintings were purchased by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and other State galleries, and thus became public property. His paintings reclaimed these western regions from their history of infamy, and endowed them with the status of the Romantic sublime. Tasmanians could be proud of their State's magnificent mountains, even if they did not contemplate going there. But soon they did contemplate it. With the formation of the Hobart Bushwalking Club in 1929, bushwalking became the élite sport of Tasmania and it was out of that tradition that Truchanas came.

Never has wilderness been so beloved, so beleaguered and so politicised. The morality, religion and idealization of wilderness are new stories being inscribed on the land—now. By analogy with Aboriginal traditions of the Dreaming, who owns these stories? Who has the right to tell them? What is the appropriate way to engage with them?

Wilderness, however we define it, is now the most contested place on Earth. It epitomises the human desire to preserve the sacred from the banality of modernity. A useful analogy is provided by those medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Annunciation that depict the Angel visiting the Virgin in her enclosed garden, with its cultivated and highly stylised flowers. This *hortus conclusus* was understood as a reference to Paradise. Mary, the new Eve, is secure in her garden of purity, but beyond the wall we glimpse the wilderness, the unregenerate landscape where evil flourishes. Today, *wilderness* has been constructed as the new garden, walled in by World Heritage Listing and legislation to protect it from the evil designs of those who would invade and destroy it. We know how shaky the wall can be in the way of protection. Legislation has proved unreliable in the face of economic arguments, even if spurious. But what does the purity of the new wilderness-garden actually mean? Like Eden and Mary's garden it is still conceptually defined by opposition—in this case, opposition to cultivation, industrialisation, mining, logging, damming of rivers, and centres of habitation—all of which, in much environmental discourse, are relegated equally to the morally besmirched category. Why *is* wilderness sacred? And what does that now mean? From whom, and for whom, should it be protected? Who should be kept out and who, if anyone, should be allowed in? These are hard, deep philosophical questions that we cannot validly consider in a vacuum or without our own prejudices and proclivities.

In the last thirty years we have so bewitched ourselves with wilderness that we have almost forgotten the other landscapes of Tasmania, the ones that found favour with the early settlers as well as those they dreaded. In the re-telling of the wilderness story the version that appears in fiction and popular non-fiction largely edits out those who engaged with it long before there were ultra-light tents and equipment, dehydrated food and GPS location aids, because these forerunners would scarcely qualify today as environmentalists.

Looking back at the successive stories that have been inscribed on the land, we can observe how ephemeral they are; how dependent on contemporary perceptions of power or powerlessness over the environment, on social systems, on a desire to exaggerate or embroider a story for political, literary or economic purposes. We tell the stories that we want to hear. As contemporary anthropologist Allesandro Duranti has said, 'We do indeed keep meeting ourselves in our voyages' (1996, p. 333).

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