

New Worlds from Old: 19th-Century Australian & American Landscapes

by Andrew Sayers, Elizabeth Kornhauser, and Elizabeth Johns. Introduction by Patrick McCaughey. Thames and Hudson 1998. 272 pp. 123 color and 59 black-and-white illustrations. \$39.95 pb.

Landscape painting emerged as an autonomous genre in the nineteenth century, as artists dispensed with the mythological *staffage* of neoclassical pastoral, and landscape canvases grew as vast as the salon machines of history painting. While Romantic poets sought salvation in nature, in what Wordsworth called an “impulse from the vernal wood” (“The Tables Turned”), the new science of geology revealed a sweeping epic in earth’s very rocks. Once a backdrop, land and sea became protagonists in the great dramas of the age. The exploration of a new continent was a story well suited to landscape painting, as America’s first indigenous school, the Hudson River School artists, realized. There was another new continent being explored in landscape images, but Australian artists of the nineteenth century remain largely unknown.

How do non-Australians picture the Antipodean landscape? Usually, the images come from the movies: for the nineteenth century, the eerie woods of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), the dusty bush station of *My Brilliant Career* (1979), the sweeping beaches and tropical fecundity of New Zealand in *The Piano* (1993); for the twentieth century, the city plagued by frogs and haunted by Aboriginal prophecies in *The Last Wave* (1977), the post-apocalyptic desert of *Mad Max* (1979). When we think of Australian painting, we tend to conjure up the brilliant, quasi-abstract bird’s-eye-view landscapes of Aboriginal artists. Yet, as this fascinating book and exhibition demonstrate, Australia had its own nineteenth-century landscape painting tradition, which paralleled the American pattern, evolving from colonial imitations of European models to aesthetic independence.

There are, of course, significant differences between Australia and North America, beginning with geography. The island continent is far more remote from Europe, and distance can breed nostalgia as well as independence. Australia was settled much later, as a penal colony, and even today is relatively sparsely populated. Colonists since the early seventeenth century, the Americans had formed an independent nation by 1776. The first fleet of ships did not reach Australia until 1788; the population of the colony was 1,035. Elizabeth Johns notes that, while citizens of the United States were cognizant of both “the resemblance and the difference of American nature and civil society from that of England,” Australians sought “a warranty that this new world was—or could be—very much like the old.”¹

The first English topographical images of North America date from the early 1600s. Americans would follow the trajectory of landscape painting from picturesque to sublime, from Romanticism to, around 1900, Impressionism. In Australia that evolution was telescoped into a single century. Australia’s terrain is different, too, flatter, with lower mountains, fewer rivers and much less vegetation. There are fewer trees, and the commonest species, the gum, is evergreen, not deciduous. The seasonal landscape, a staple of European artistic convention, becomes a specialty in the United States. The Hudson River School painters gloried in the vibrant colors of fall foliage.

While American landscape painters such as Thomas Cole (1801–48), Frederic E. Church (1826–1900), and Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) have been the subject of recent retrospectives, their Australian contemporaries are little known to outsiders. *New Worlds* offers some tantalizing parallels between these two painting traditions.

Australian landscape follows the usual historical sequence: topographical documentation of *terra incognita*, settling images that attempt to make the new world conform to the old, ethnographic illustrations of indigenous cultures, and, finally, the forging of a new style. European aesthetic categories—the sublime, the picturesque, the pastoral arcadian—are obvious in some images. English-born John Glover (1767–1849) studied the works of Claude Lorrain (1600–1682), and the influence shows in the Antipodean pastoral *The Bath of Diana, Van Dieman's Land* (1837). Setting his version of the Greek myth in Tasmania, Glover casts Aborigines as the goddess, her attendant nymphs and Actaeon. Claude's landscapes were almost always suffused with melancholy, an unrequited longing for the Golden Age. This Tasmanian arcadia carries a similar undertone; it is a vision of what Glover called "the gay, happy life the natives led before the White people came here."²

Aborigines appear in a less fanciful setting in Glover's *The Last Muster of the Aborigines at Risdon* (1836), documenting a final gathering before relocation to Flinders Island. The trees towering above the tiny figures are snake-like, almost expressionistic. The way Glover moves between classical and Romantic idioms suggests how fluid landscape painting was at this period. His *Corrobory of Natives in Mills Plains* (1832) mixes ethnographic documentation and Romantic mystery. The composition is dominated by a dramatically diagonal tree silhouetted against a pink-fleeced sky, an effect reminiscent of Caspar Friedrich. The tiny figures dancing under the tree were based on Glover's own field sketches. Images of indigenous peoples, their way of life threatened by the expansion of European colonies, appealed to collectors with anthropological as well as aesthetic interests. Glover's most important patron, Sir Thomas Phillipps, also had a longstanding relationship with George Catlin (1796–1872), best known for his portraits of Native Americans.³ Despite his many sympathetic images of Aborigines, however, Glover was an Englishman abroad. *Hobart Town, Taken from the Garden Where I Lived* (1832) is a very personal view. Sullivan's Cove, Sandy Bay, lies in the distance, but the foreground—with its two-story Georgian house and charming flower garden—could be any corner of England.

There are a number of striking parallels drawn in *New Worlds*. Compare, for example, two paintings combining tourism and scientific curiosity: Ludwig Becker's (1808–61) *Blowhole, Tasman's Peninsula, Van Dieman's Land* and Frederic E. Church's *Natural Bridge, Virginia*, both dated 1852. The German-born Becker, an artist-naturalist who worked with the Victoria Exploring Expedition, here depicts a celebrated geological phenomenon, in crisp watercolor. Scale is established by the small on-lookers, drenched by an in-coming wave. The expanse of shimmering sea glimpsed through the rock arch adds a hint of Romantic infinity. Church similarly uses small figures to establish scale, in this case a black guide pointing out the natural wonder to a seated woman. The Virginia site was already rich in history, having been surveyed by George Washington and owned by Thomas Jefferson, who purchased it in 1774 from George III. With the sunlight raking across its upper reaches and the shadowy gloom at its base, Church's *Natural Bridge* looks suitably monumental. The thatch of vegetation gives it the picturesque quality so prized in Romantic oil sketches of the Colosseum, before archaeologists stripped it. In the 1870s Henry James described sitting inside the Colosseum: "I always feel... as if I were seated in the depth of some Alpine Valley."⁴ Blurring the line between natural and man-made monuments was a way of acknowledging the might and beauty of earth's geologic history. Church was strongly influenced by the German naturalist-traveler Alexander

von Humboldt (1769–1859). Inspired by the descriptions of the tropics in *Voyage de Humboldt et Bonpland aux Regions Equinoxiales*, a monumental work in twenty-three volumes (1805–34), he made his first trip to South America in 1853. Church owned several editions of von Humboldt’s great work of popular science *Cosmos: Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* (1848).⁵

Another artist-naturalist surveying Australia, the German-born Eugene von Guérard (1811–1901) also followed the theories of von Humboldt, notably the idea that the landscape was in a state of constant flux, that it had been shaped by on-going processes such as volcanic action and erosion. Von Guérard published a book of colored lithographs, *Australian Landscapes* (1866–68), advertised as suitable for “the artist, the geologist, and the tourist in search of the picturesque.”⁶ Charles Darwin (1809–82) had visited New Zealand and Tasmania aboard the H.M.S. *Beagle*, and the Antipodes were considered a privileged locus for observing natural history. In “The Last Aborigine,” the poet William Sharp (1855–1905) described a mysterious land revealing glimpses of earth in another age:

The giants of an old strange land
That was exultant in its noon
When all our Europe was o’returned
With deluge and with shifting sand,
With earthquakes that the hills inured
And central fires that fused and burned.⁷

The most archaic of the continents, Australia was also the least affected by the Tertiary earth movements which built the Alps, the Andes and the Himalayas. Notions of the sublime conceptualized in the European Alps were transferable to Bierstadt’s Rockies and Church’s Andes. But Australia, with its lower profile and more subdued landscape, had its own oddities to be documented, its own poetry to be grasped. In von Guérard’s landscapes, interest in geological curiosities mingles with a sense of vast, eerie spaces. *Stony Rises, Lake Corangamite* (1857) depicts the huge basalt formations, ten to sixty feet in height, *contre-jour*, silhouetted against the sunset, as the Aborigines—here, a literally vanishing people—wander through the gathering gloom.

In *New Worlds* von Guérard’s works are juxtaposed with those of another German-trained artist, Albert Bierstadt, who helped create a visual template for the American West. Von Guérard’s *Mount William from Mount Dryden, Victoria* (1857) is on the cover of *New Worlds*; it was a good choice. The jagged sandstone peaks in the hazy distance, under a naturalistically casual convoy of clouds, rise above a vast plain of brush and small trees. Like Bierstadt’s sweeping vistas, this is a new image of the wilderness sublime. In *Moving Pictures* Anne Hollander describes this kind of landscape as proto-cinematic: “Even a specific and immediate scene is forever partial, forever escaping and spreading out beyond understanding, beyond an artist’s ability to box it in....”⁸ Hollander remarks that Bierstadt’s compositions are “left asymmetrical, all full of possibility, rather than festooned in Claudian harmony....”⁹ Bierstadt’s *View of Donner Lake, California* (1871–72) looks down from the heights into a luminous valley, but the railroad tracks and snowsheds of the Central Pacific Railroad, which was following the same route as the tragic Donner Party, complicates the image.

One of von Guérard’s most historically important paintings is *Tower Hill* (1855), a scene of extinct volcanoes with a shallow marsh in the foreground. After a century

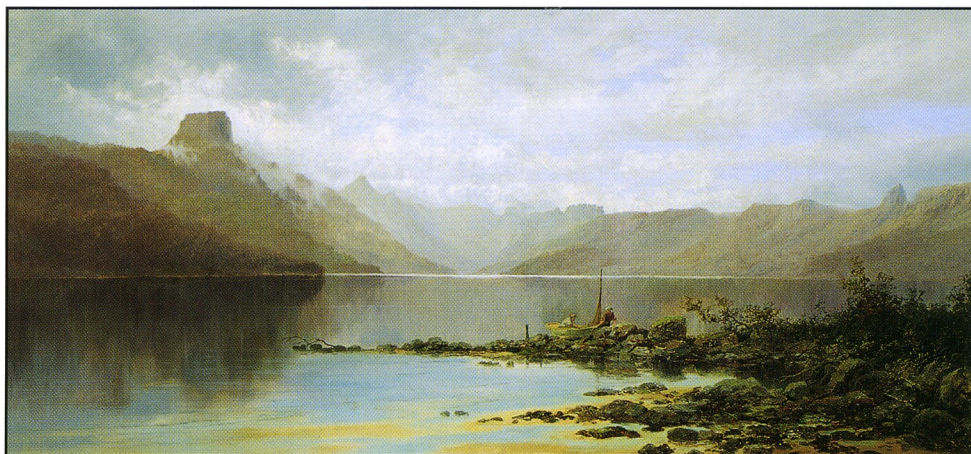
of development, the area was declared a State Game Reserve in 1961, and von Guérard's painting became a blueprint for the land-restoration program.¹⁰ The American painter Thomas Moran (1837–1926) played a more direct role in nature conservation. As a member of Ferdinand Hayden's United States Geological Survey of the Territories in the West in 1871, Moran documented the often startling terrain of Yellowstone. Moran's images influenced Congress to declare Yellowstone the first national park in 1872, the year he painted *Hot Springs of Gardiners River*.

Toward the close of the nineteenth century, many Australian painters, like painters in Europe and the United States, became Impressionists. Flattening their compositions and applying paint in patches, they depicted country recreations and urban activities saturated in sunlight. Yet, while participating in an international movement, Australian painters also seemed to be finding a unique national style. *New Worlds* juxtaposes works by these Australian artists with works by Americans such as George Inness (1825–94), Winslow Homer (1836–1910), William Merritt Chase (1849–1916), and John Twachtman (1853–1902). The Australians more than hold their own.

David Davies's (1864–1939) *Moonrise* (1894)—an evocative nocturne in greys, browns, and smoky greens—depicts a ghostly moon just lifting above a subtly curved horizon, evoking both Inness and Whistler. More typically, however, *fin-de-siècle* Australian landscapes revel in flat-out midday heat and light. A prime example is Arthur Streeton's (1867–1943) *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might* (1896). The defiantly poetic title (taken from Shelley) seems, at first, ambitious for this stretch of scrubland interrupted by an expanse of river, with hazy mountains in the distance, painted from a high ledge in 108° heat. But Streeton succeeds brilliantly in his aim, as he wrote to a friend, “to go straight inland (away from all polite society)” where he could “create something entirely new, and try and translate some of the great hidden poetry that I know is here, but have not seen or felt it.”¹¹ This is a terrific painting, with an exhilarating sense of space. Streeton puts us at tree-top level, gazing out over the still, shallow blue river and casual vegetation toward the distant line of hills. Without the framing *coulisse* of trees sanctioned by Claude and used by nearly every landscape painter through Turner, Streeton's scene seems panoramic, even though the canvas is square. A complex flow of horizontal and diagonal energies holds the composition in dynamic balance.

Another high-angle landscape by Streeton, *From McMahon's Point—Fare One Penny* (1890), offers a deceptively off-hand corner of Sydney harbor, but the underlying geometry is as taut as a Japanese print. A triangle of roof and a zigzag of quay cut neat shapes into the blue water. The waiting ferry lets out a plume of smoke that leads the eye upward to the far shore and then to the pale yellow sky above. The closest American analogue for Streeton's inviting, sun-drenched landscapes are the Long Island idylls of William Merritt Chase, although Chase's world is more genteel. *Shinnecock Landscape* (c.1892) depicts a brownish summer hill, peppered with flowering shrubs and topped by a handsome tree. Chase's white-clad children are as swiftly dabbed in as the airy clouds in the clean blue sky. Chase and Streeton are both Impressionists, but not in the European manner; Chase thought the French Impressionists “more scientific than artistic.”¹² Americans and Australians shared a pragmatic attitude toward their painting, along with a relish for their own terrain.

In 1886 the Australian-born and trained Streeton met the English immigrant Tom Roberts (1856–1931). With a few friends they formed a group that met for *plein air* painting sessions near Heidelberg, on the outskirts of Melbourne. By then, Andrew



W.C. Piguenit, *Lake St. Clair, the Source of the River Derwent, Tasmania* (1887)
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Australia

Sayers notes, “an Australian visual typology” had emerged.¹³ Roberts’s *Allegro con brio; Bourke Street West* (c. 1886) could be a scene from a movie. A wide diagonal street, white with dust, rises toward a whitened sky. The townscape is crowded with incident: buggies, men in top hats, women with parasols, urchins darting in and out of the crowds. Australian landscape painters, like their American counterparts, developed their national landscape style gradually, by learning to be at home in a strange world, without sacrificing what made the landscape unique.

The exhibition “New Worlds from Old: 19th-Century Australian & American Landscapes,” organized by the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, ends its tour at The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., January 26–April 18, 1999.

—Gail Leggio

Notes

1. Elizabeth Johns, “Landscape Painting in America & Australia in an Urban Century,” *New Worlds from Old: 19th-Century Australian & American Landscapes* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, distributed by Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1998), p. 26.
2. *New Worlds*, catalogue, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
4. Henry James, *Italian Hours*, edited by John Auchard (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 130.
5. Franklin Kelly, “Frederic Church and The Enterprise of Landscape Painting,” *The Magazine Antiques* (November 1989), p. 114.
6. Johns, *New Worlds*, p. 39.
7. Edmund Clarence Stedman, editor, *A Victorian Anthology 1837–1895* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895), p. 546.
8. Anne Hollander, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 264.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
10. *New Worlds*, catalogue, p. 154.
11. Cited, *New Worlds*, catalogue, p. 187.
12. Cited, *New Worlds*, catalogue, p. 219.
13. *New Worlds*, catalogue, p. 66.

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