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### The Picturesque Colonial Archive: a visual *terra nullius*?

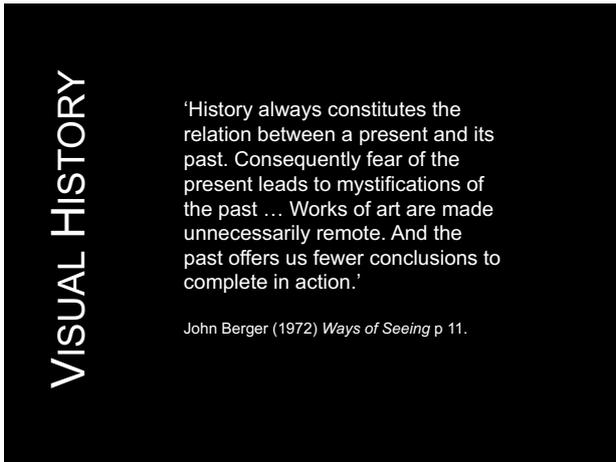


John Glover, *The Last Muster of the Tasmanian Aborigines at Risdon, 1836*, oil on canvas, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.

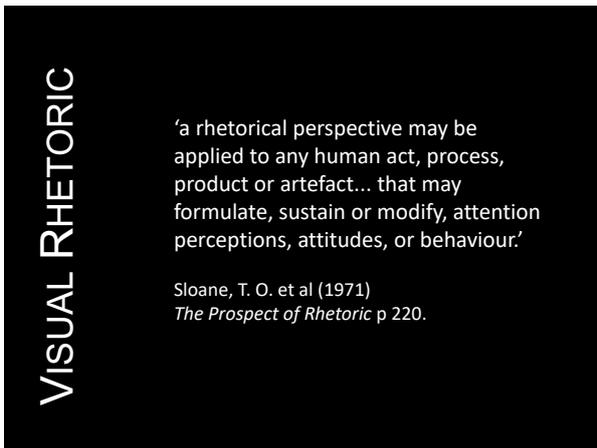
Public awareness and enthusiasm for the landscape works of John Glover, featuring Tasmanian Aboriginal people in rapturous celebration of their culture, have created a distorted understanding of the place of Aborigines in the painted colonial landscape of Van Diemen's Land.



My research over recent years, culminating in the current National Gallery of Australia touring exhibition, *The National Picture: the art of Tasmania's Black War*, has highlighted a 'curious absence' of Aboriginal people in picturesque landscape scenes prior to Glover's arrival – curious, because this is precisely the time that Aboriginal resistance was at its most energetic.



In this talk, I'd like to explore some key questions about the presence (and absence) of Aboriginal people in the colonial visual archive, and draw attention to the value of colonial art not simply as a graphic accoutrement to written texts, but as an invaluable and underappreciated source of historical understanding of our nation's foundations.



A critical reading of the context of such artwork also enables us to reveal some of the rhetorical functions that officially sanctioned art served in the establishment and development of the colony.



*Pêche des sauvages du Cap de Diemen*, engraving by Copia, Jacques Louis published 1817, after Jean Piron, 1793.

When French and British navigators and artists arrived in Van Diemen's Land, the noble savages that they depicted were more complex representations than those usually referred to in popular histories. These depictions carried a rich cultural and literary heritage, with a wide pallet of thematic aspects or variations of noble savagery from which to choose. The Tasmanian Aborigines could be seen as heroic and beyond servitude to civil rule and all its corrupting influences (especially property), a reflection of French disillusion with institutional power and the corruption of society by injustice. They also symbolized a heroic and untamed nobility with sovereign rights to nature, leading a virtuous existence beyond colonial rule. They could be a remnant of the Golden Age and, through mortality in common with the civilised European, offer hope of a return to lost freedoms. Alongside all of this, they could also represent a disparate and primitive hard savagery from which Europeans could reassuringly distinguish themselves.

Between 1642 and 1803, Tasmanian Aborigines were imagined or seen to manifest most of these themes of noble savagery at one time or another, constituting an unstable presence in European perception for as long as they were denied the sort of agency that was assumed as a defining quality of European superiority.



Nicolas-Martin Petit, *Couleur 114*, 1802, drawing, Muséum d'histoire naturelle du Havre.

### *The Miserable Savage*

In 1688, the buccaneer William Dampier (1651-1715) arrived with the first Englishmen to land on the shores of New Holland. Dampier's writing proved to be influential on both the expectations and attitudes of future British expeditions to what was soon to become one of its most prized possessions in the Indian Pacific. Dampier's eventual celebrity was due not only to his career as a pirate, but also his success as a publicist. Dampier's focus on observation, collecting and publication reflected this, and ensured that his narrative of *New Voyage Around the World*, published in 1697, was widely read afterwards.

In this publication, which ran to multiple editions, Dampier famously remarked that 'the Inhabitants of this Country are the miserablest People in the World... setting aside their Humane Shape, they differ but little from Brutes.'<sup>1</sup> This severe first impression was to be echoed nearly a century later, influencing the impressions and conclusions of Capt. James Cook and Nicholas Baudin.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cited in *ibid.* p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*. pp. 169-70.

Dampier, on visiting the north-western coastline of Australia in 1699, initiated an understanding of Australian Aborigines that would persist for the next three centuries. Australian Aborigines, observed Dampier, had ‘no Houses and skin garments, Sheep, Poultry and Fruits of the Earth’, as had ‘the great variety of savages’ already encountered.<sup>3</sup> The familiarity of later influential British scientists, such as Sir Joseph Banks, with Dampier’s reports ensured that these early impressions continued to influence British perceptions. Records in the late nineteenth-century by Banks, James Cook and Watkin Tench reinforced the idea that Australian Aborigines were not only unfamiliar with, but incapable of agriculture. These ideas, evidenced by the observations of highly respected and experienced authorities, created a profound and persistent view that Australian Aborigines could be considered as exceptions to the British experience of other native people in command of their territories. An expectation was established that, rather than being able to exert any influence over nature, Aborigines were entirely at its mercy. This was also suitably convenient for colonists, who were now freed of any complication that proceeded from displacing people involved in recognisable (and therefore legitimate) possession of their territory. It was as though Aborigines had never actually occupied their lands, but were inconvenient and incongruous place-holders in territories awaiting discovery as latently English.

Explorers peeled back the landscape’s mystery to give way to the colonial imagination, and its capacity to form itself into pastoral familiarity.<sup>4</sup> But it was with an implicit sense of emptiness that the colonies were most readily apprehended – an unstable state inherently available for completion. This sense of emptiness did not relate only to civilisation or *terra nullius*, but to any sensible story of its own.

James Erskine Calder expressed this succinctly in the 1840s,

The country we describe is as yet without a history, without traditions, and indeed without association. Its past is a veritable blank, and we look back into it only to discover that it has nothing to reveal ... there is no such thing as classical soil here.<sup>5</sup>



Joseph Lycett, *View of Tasman’s Peak, from Macquarie Plains, Van Diemen’s Land*, from Lycett (1824).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Kaye Andersen and Colin Perrin, 'How Race Became Everything: Australia and Polygenism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31/5 (2008). p. 11

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the explorer’s gaze and the assumed role of objective observer, see Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). p. 104.

The idea that the British had arrived in a place with no history offered opportunities not only for building a new world from scratch, but to also reset the clock. Van Diemen's Land was proposed through picturesque representation as a kind of Eden; a new beginning for British settlers. This is elegantly captured in 1824 by Joseph Lycett when he published *Views in Australia*, writing,

In contemplating the progressive effects of Colonization, even slightly as they are sketched in these pages, and exhibited in the following Views, the mind is naturally led into reflections upon the origin and decay of nations. In these infant settlements of Australia we probably behold the germs of a mighty empire, which in future ages will pour forth its myriads to re-people future deserts, in those very regions from which the pabulum of their own existence is at present drawn... What was the state in which the Aborigines of Britain appeared two thousand years ago to Caesar, when Rome's legions first beheld our chalky cliffs? If then such was England... what may not Australia be?<sup>6</sup>



Thomas Watling, North-West View taken from the Rocks above Sydney in New-South-Wales, for John White, Esqr, c. 1793-5, drawing, State Library of New South Wales.

Early Australian landscape painters were place-makers in an unfamiliar land; helping, as Bernard Smith explained, to 'stimulate European thought concerning man and nature in both art and science.'<sup>7</sup> Through the publication of their work as engravings, the metropol was able to define itself in cogent contrast to its expanding fringe by challenging techniques and perceptions, and by naming and claiming new domains. At the same time, colonial landscape artists were also practitioners of Christian traditions, drawing on deep roots in Antiquity that urged the beholder to advance with a theological determination that neatly intersected with the colonial project of their patrons. To be viable in an empire built on extraction of resources from its colonies, this meant the settler population had to occupy and domesticate the Australian landscape. For Aborigines, the consequence was displacement from their ancestral homes.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Lycett, *Views in Australia or New South Wales & Van Diemen's Land Delineated, in Fifty Views, with Descriptive Letter Prefs.* (facimile edn.; Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1971). pp. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*. p. 7.

*(Dis)placing Aborigines in the Picturesque*

Paul Carter argues that the picturesque aesthetic is inherently involved in the appropriation of land.

'The picturesque...is thoroughly entwined with notions of nature's use-value and the need to appropriate this wealth. Indeed the language of scientific and picturesque study is a language of appropriation.'<sup>8</sup>

Colonial landscape painters acted in the same way as map-makers, rendering a landscape familiar and recognisable to European frameworks of understanding and of use. 'The picturesque landscape, says Paul Miller, 'appears as a culturally constructed aesthetic. It is a landscape to which a cultural identity is applied.' The role of Aborigines in this re-enculturated landscape needed to be closely-defined, serving the particular needs of patrons and viewers of the resulting images. The beginnings of the picturesque in Australia can be seen in the work of Thomas Watling during the 1790s.<sup>9</sup> Joseph Lycett subtitled his 1824 publication 'Picturesque Views' in an appeal to the increasingly popular reception of this approach.



Figure 48 - John Lewin, *Sydney Cove*, 1808, watercolour, State Library of New South Wales.

The picturesque approach, which we see employed throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century in the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, offered a convenient rhetorical place for Aborigines in a visual narrative that sought to relegate them as a preceding moment in an inevitable process of colonial progress. Depictions of Aborigines in the Sydney colony are of essential importance in understanding the development of patterns and practices that were likely to have influenced the visual representation of Aborigines in Van Diemen's Land.

John Lewin's 1808 topographic view *Sydney Cove* (fig. 48) is an exemplary study in the use of Aboriginal figures in extolling the success of colonization. The extent of the colony is impressive and contrasts with a naked Aboriginal figure carrying a spear and placed just off-

<sup>8</sup> Paul Carter, *Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber Press, 1987). p. 287. Cited in Paul Miller, 'Monotony and the Picturesque: Landscape in Three Australian Travel Narratives of the 1830s', in Jennifer Mcdonell and Michael Deves (eds.), *Land and Identity: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Conference* (University of New England, Armadale: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997), 52-57. p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Organ, 'Conrad Martens and the Picturesque: Precursor to Australian Impressionism', (University of Wollongong, 1993). p. 13.

centre in his regarding of a large, three-masted vessel hauled up on the shore for careering. The primitiveness of the original inhabitants is emphasised by two more Aboriginal figures in a canoe; dwarfed by the bulk of the ship. The Aborigines in these views seem content to practice their daily pursuits, fishing from the shore and carrying lighted fires in their canoes. It is the epitome of a successful and happy, domesticated colony.

### *Beginnings of Absence - John Lewin*



John Lewin, *A view of Colonel Paterson's garden, Yorkton Port Dalrymple, 1809*, watercolour, State Library of New South Wales

When Lieutenant Governor William Paterson (1775-1810) returned to Sydney from Van Diemen's Land in 1809 to replace William Bligh, he asked Lewin to make copies of a series of drawings and watercolours by the Tasmanian surveyor George Prideaux Robert Harris (1755-1810). His drawing of *A View of Colonel Paterson's Garden Yorkton* (1808) illustrates Paterson's assertion that the district was 'one of the most beautiful countries in the world' demonstrating 'the settlement's rapid domesticity tamed by art and design'<sup>10</sup>.



John Lewin, *A Bengal cow and her calf English cross one year old, 1809*, watercolour, State Library of New South Wales.

This achievement is further emphasised in the painting *A Bengal cow and her calf English cross one year old*, (fig. 51), demonstrating the productivity and fine breeding so symbolic of imperial industry. It would not be expected that either *Paterson's Garden*, or *Bengal Cow* would include a Tasmanian Aborigine. This juxtaposition was inconceivable, given that it was the need for land to graze such beasts that necessitated the removal of Aborigines, not to mention that Aborigines were known to spear cattle and sheep in their resistance to British

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

invasion. Instead, *Bengal Cow* can be seen as a symbol of the displacement of Tasmanian Aborigines. Similarly, the fences, roads and other signs of agricultural domesticity in *Paterson's Garden* also provided signs of exclusion. The inclusion of livestock, fences, roads, homesteads and pastoral workers were therefore a presence in these picturesque views that was the concomitant of Aboriginal absence.



John Lewin, *The second Cataract on the North Esk near Launceston, Port Dalrymple*, 1809, watercolour (left); G. W. Evans, *A view near Grose Head, New South Wales*, 1809, watercolour (right); with corresponding details (below). State Library of New South Wales.

Several of Lewin's Tasmanian landscapes of 1809 include Europeans engaged in activities such as fishing and boating. Of these views, one compares closely with an earlier watercolour by Evans: *A View near Grose Head, New South Wales*. This painting was owned by Paterson, and probably seen by Lewin.<sup>11</sup> Both views freely utilise common European criteria of the picturesque and sublime to engage with elements of the Australian wilds. Evans does this not only through the dramatic topographical features of the landscape, but also by placing Aborigines (one holding a long spear) in silhouette against the foaming rapids.

Lewin's remarkably similar *Second Cataract* version of this view repeats many of the compositional and dynamic elements, but pointedly chooses Europeans with long fishing poles instead. However, the replacement of Tasmanian Aborigines in the landscape is likely to be for more profound reasons than to simply emphasise the 'pleasure' to be obtained in a Van Diemen's Land view. The effect is to diminish the sense of wildness and provide an assurance of security.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 149.

## *A Pattern of Exclusion*



G. W. Evans, *View of the east side of Sydney Cove*, c. 1803, watercolour, State Library of New South Wales (top); *Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land*, 1828, engraving, National Gallery of Australia (bottom).

Evans also falls in with this pattern of exclusion. His *View of east side of Sydney Cove* (c. 1803), places both Aborigines and Europeans in the same manner employed by he and Lewin in their Sydney views; together in a scene of amity against the background of a bustling harbour and a thriving town. However, this contrasts sharply with Evans' picture of *Hobart Town, Van Diemen's Land* (1828), which instead of a foreground of Aborigines, features numerous settlers engaged in building and fishing.

It may be that the absence of Aborigines in Evans' and Lewin's Van Diemen's Land scenes was co-incidental. However, it seems more likely that there was a desire on the part of Paterson in commissioning these artists to focus more deliberately on the domestication of Van Diemen's Land scenes. This was easily achieved by simply removing reminders of Aborigines completely.

An alternative to this possibility is that the artists were simply depicting what they saw; and there were no Aborigines to be seen in Port Dalrymple or Hobart Town. However, a brief survey of colonial histories confirms Aborigines as a significant part of the experience of settlers in Van Diemen's Land. At Port Dalrymple this contact began from the earliest times,<sup>12</sup> with encounters in the locality of the Cataract continuing up until at least the mid 1820s.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Aborigines were regular visitors to Hobart Town over this period, often camping close to, or within the town.<sup>14</sup> These people became known as the 'Tame Mob',

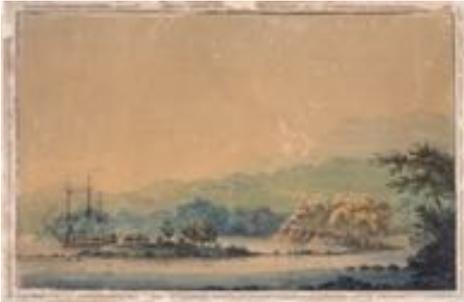
<sup>12</sup> Bonwick, *The Lost Tasmanian Race*. p. 23

<sup>13</sup> Roth, *The Aborigines of Tasmania*. p. 135

<sup>14</sup> Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*. p. 67.

and numbered between twenty and thirty men, women and children.<sup>15</sup> In 1824, at the time of the publication of Lycett's *Views of Australia*, James Boyce notes that a large group of over sixty Aborigines visited Hobart and camped on the outskirts of town.<sup>16</sup>

It was only after this time that settlers began to insist on exclusive enjoyment of their land grants and started to try to drive Aborigines away – no doubt a critical point in escalation of conflict that ultimately culminated in the declaration of martial law in the colony.



G. W. Evans (unsigned), *View of Sullivan's Cove*, 1804, watercolour, State Library of New South Wales.

One of the earliest known paintings of European settlement in Van Diemen's Land is a view of Sullivan Cove 1804, thought to be by Evans. This scene shows the beginnings of a camp on Hunter Island, with two groups of tents as the only signs of land-based facilities, and a team of men working with a hand drawn cart. A ship and longboat stand at anchor nearby. A small flock of gulls is the only sign of local inhabitants.

The importance, as Richard Neville points out, of landscape studies so commonly produced at this early time in the colony's history, was to fold landscapes that were admired by those responsible for the success of colonial development into a European aesthetic template that would be easily read by cultured people. According to Neville, 'A landscape that could so easily be turned into a picture was also proof of its value.'<sup>17</sup> Decisions on whether or not to place Aborigines in such pictures were almost certainly made with intention. So why did Lewin and Evans not employ this device in Van Diemen's Land? The rocks in the foreground of *View of Sullivan's Cove* are perfectly suited to the placement of Aborigines according to the picturesque orthodoxy practiced by this artist in his Sydney views of the time.

Without evidence in the form of correspondence on the matter from Paterson, it can only be concluded that this was either a result of direct instructions from Paterson, or perhaps an informal consensus particular to the Tasmanian colonies.

### *Tasmanian Views – John Lycett*

<sup>15</sup> Murray Johnson and Ian Macfarlane, *Van Diemen's Land: An Aboriginal History* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2015). p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*. pp. 186-87.

<sup>17</sup> Neville, *Mr J W Lewin: Painter and Naturalist*. p. 178.



Joseph Lycett, *View of Port Macquarie*, (above); *View on the River Tamar*, (below) engravings from Lycett, 1824.

Perhaps the best known of the early topographical artists to produce views of Van Diemen's Land is Joseph Lycett. This artist has been subject to considerable scholarly attention, yet none of this discusses the noticeable absence of Aborigines in these views. Lycett's Tasmanian views were published as a series of engravings in London in 1824.<sup>18</sup> In this collection of twenty-four lithographs of New South Wales, seven include Aboriginal figures. Of the same number of Van Diemen's Land scenes, nineteen include noticeable human figures, but none of these are Aborigines. Instead, his views are populated by settlers, going about their leisure and work.

Lycett may have accompanied Governor Macquarie on his visit to Tasmania between April and July 1821, although there is a lack of expected evidence to support this, including no references in shipping, correspondence or official records. While John McPhee concludes that G. W. Evans is the most likely source of original material that Lycett then copied, this is not an explanation for the absence of Aborigines in his views.

Claims in Lycett's publication that views were made 'on the spot' cannot be regarded as evidence. However, regardless of whether Lycett actually visited the island, it remains striking that his publication presents the Tasmanian colony as devoid of Natives.

A comparison of Lycett's *View of Port Macquarie*, a location north of Newcastle, and *View on the River Tamar*, north of Hobart, is instructive. Both these views are of locations at some distance from the colonial centre where the danger of Aboriginal resistance might be greatest. Compositionally, the scenes are very similar, with figures on the shore gesturing to a sailing vessel just off shore. In fact, the vessel depicted in both views is identical, no doubt

<sup>18</sup> John McPhee, 'Views of Australia', in John McPhee (ed.), *Joseph Lycett: Convict Artist* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2006).

taken from a common sketchbook. The key difference is that while the figures in *Port Macquarie* are Aboriginal, those in the *Tamar River* view are all European.



Joseph Lycett, View of The Heads at the entrance to Port Jackson, New South Wales, (above); Mount Nelson, near Hobart Town, from near Mulgrave battery, Van Diemen's Land, (below), engravings from Lycett, 1824.

Another comparison of similar scenes demonstrates the repeated pattern of Aboriginal absence in Van Diemen's Land. *View of the Heads* (NSW) and *Mt Nelson* both show gateways to the colonies, with signal stations indicating state of the art communications technology, and ships in full sail connecting these remote outposts to the empire. In the NSW view Aborigines are included along with settlers as markers of place and, like the colonists at the signal station, gesture toward the ships. The Van Diemen's Land scene is typically without Aboriginal figures. Instead a uniformed officer accompanies a lady – creating a picture of order, security and perhaps sophistication lacking in the NSW view.

John McPhee remarks on the function of such symbols, these:

embellishments emphasise the extent and impact of European settlement and the safety of settlers and must have been very deliberately added, not just to emphasise the picturesque elements of the landscape, but to appeal to potential investors and settlers.<sup>19</sup>

This leaves a key question. If Lycett's depictions of Aborigines in NSW could be used to assuage concerns about frontier conflict, why was this not attempted in relation to Van Diemen's Land which, at the time Lycett was creating his views of the colony was also experiencing violence between settlers and Aborigines?

### *A Colonial Prospectus*

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<sup>19</sup> John McPhee, 'Van Diemen's Land Watercolours', *ibid.* p. 151.



Joseph Lycett, *View of Tasman's Peak, from Macquarie Plains, Van Diemen's Land*, from Lycett 1824.

There is a strong suggestion that Lycett was producing work in response to the need by colonial administrators to emphasise the favourable prospects offered by the colony. Several of the authors in McPhee's edited volume make this case plainly in relation to New South Wales, where the presence of Aborigines was undeniable and needed to be framed in the minds of viewers in simple picturesque terms. The task here seems to have been to depict the Natives as subdued and simply going about their curious business. As such, they could be included as staffage in views of colonial industry and progress without compromising the desired effect. Indeed, the presence of Aborigines, much like kangaroos, seems to be emblematic of an exotic land of promise, where the presence of people evidenced the bounty of these new lands without threatening the prospect of peace and prosperity.

The description of the 'natives of Australia' in Lycett's *Views in Australia* is clearly aimed at creating an impression of a parlous race, with little to threaten the colonist's ambition,

It would seem, from the concurrence of the best opinions upon the subject, that the natives of Australia occupy the lowest rank in the gradatory scale of the human species... their weapons of defence are the most rude imaginable... at worst, they are described as unable to muster more than fourteen or fifteen fighting men.<sup>20</sup>

In the detailed description of Van Diemen's Land, Aborigines are scarcely mentioned, other than to say that they were in the early years of the colony, 'excited... to acts of plunder' by bushrangers.<sup>21</sup>

Jeanette Hoorn sums up the task of landscape painters in her comments on Lycett's publication *Views of Australia*, as a,

<sup>20</sup> Lycett, *Views in Australia or New South Wales & Van Diemen's Land Delineated, in Fifty Views, with Descriptive Letter Prefs.* p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.

new framework ... in the use of visual language that presented Europeans as masters of a fertile land that had been ordered by them and in which they were able to experience leisure.<sup>22</sup>

She also invokes Kenneth Clark's romantic definition of landscape, tying it in neatly with the imperative for capital development,

It is this new image of white settlers in harmony with a bountiful nature that produced the first sustained pastoral imagery and, at the same time, the first images of private property.<sup>23</sup>



John Lewin, *A view of Colonel Paterson's garden, Yorkton Port Dalrymple, 1809*, watercolour, State Library of New South Wales

Lewin's *Paterson's Garden* is best considered with this context in mind. This simple watercolour demonstrated the potential for a new and harmonious beginning for the English in Van Diemen's Land, made possible by the transfer of ownership from the crown to private title and elaborated by the improvements wrought by fences, roads and forest clearance. It is no place for Aborigines. In fact, it is presented as evidence of the results that can flow from their absence when an enterprising individual took up a land grant.

The establishment of private land was an important step in guaranteeing a thriving colony. Land, once under governmental control, had to be 'taken up' and proven to be productive. The task of the landscape artist during this period was to document and promote this process. The preceding necessity to alienate that land from the original owners need not be in question, especially when Aboriginal figures that might raise such uncomfortable issues at a time of continuing resistance to European invasion were banished from views.

Lieutenant John Bowen, who was in charge of the first Van Diemen's Land settlement at Risdon Cove in 1803, evoked Dampier's idea of hard savagery by pronouncing before ever seeing an Aborigine that they would not be 'of any use'. He thought he would be fortunate if he never saw them. By 1824 the extent of displacement of Aborigines from their country had escalated conflict, which worsened with every settler attack on the Aboriginal families that had to be forcibly driven from their land grants. Worse, the frightening spectre of bushranging had been reawakened with a report in the *Hobart Town Gazette* of December 1823 that two Aborigines had led a 'tame mob' of their countrymen on a rampage against stock-keepers, killing five in three separate incidents. Sharon Morgan considers that 'a

<sup>22</sup> Hoorn, *Australian Pastoral: The Making of a White Landscape*. p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

degree of paranoia took hold of many settlers at this time'<sup>24</sup>. According to Lyndall Ryan, these incidents were associated with 'widespread panic' in the colony.<sup>25</sup> Aborigines, who had once been dismissed as little more than 'orang-outangs'<sup>26</sup> had now to be taken seriously as a potential threat to the colony's success. It is likely that, in response to this developing situation, Lycett's *Views of Australia* paid careful attention to Aboriginal presence in the troubled colony of VDL, by bracketing them off from the colonists' world.



Artist unknown  
The new road leading to the northward from New Norfolk, Van Diemen's Land c.1829-1830  
Watercolour, National Library of Australia



Detail - The new road leading to the northward from New Norfolk, Van Diemen's Land c.1829-1830

In my research for *The National Picture*, I was only able to find one image, by an unknown artist, of Aboriginal people in the VDL landscape produced during the period when conflict and fear was at its height. (talk about image and detail).

- implicit danger
- at a time when proclamations allowed Aborigines to be shot on sight in settled districts

My view of the most likely artist responsible for this intriguing sketch is George Evans' assistant surveyor, Thomas Scott (1800-1855), who made two rough sketches in his notebook *Account of Van Diemen's Land, 1822*. One of the drawings shows four Aborigines, one with a long spear and the other with two waddies, while two others are seated in front of a hut by a fire. The other sketch is of an Aboriginal man spearing a kangaroo (fig. 62)



Figure 62 - Thomas Scott, Natives of Van Diemen's Land Sitting at their Fire in front of their hut; a Native of Van Diemen's Land Spearing a Kangaroo, 1821, drawings (detail), State Library of New South Wales.

Unfortunately, the notebook does not include any further description of these scenes. However, they do provide clear evidence that Scott, and possibly Evans and Macquarie, did

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*. p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

encounter Aboriginal people on their tour of the colony at that time – making their absence in the visual record even more peculiar. In another of Scott's sketchbooks, also dated on the cover as 1822, there are dozens of simple views of landscape features, maps and other sketches of various insects, birds and fish.



Thomas Scott, *Lower fall on Jones's River*, 1823. Inscription, 'South bank of the River Derwent V.D. Land. The land around it the property of Walter Angus B... Esqr. Gum tree - notched by the Natives with a flint stone for climbing it', ink and watercolour, State Library of New South Wales.

However, the most finished of these is a watercolour view of a waterfall on Jones's River, flowing into the Derwent. Prominent in the foreground is a tree, clearly displaying notches cut by Aborigines in their hunt for possums (Fig. 63). Scott describes the tree as being marked by Aborigines with a 'flint stone for climbing it'. While the sketch includes no Aboriginal figures, it is a rare document of the cultural presence of Aboriginal people in the landscape at a time when this was almost completely absent.

My conclusion is that due to the escalating level of conflict on the island during the early 1820s, evidenced by a flood of letters sent home by settlers, and in official correspondence wrestling with the challenge of protecting the lives of both settler and Aborigine alike,<sup>27</sup> any attempt to depict Tasmanian Aborigines as passive and unopposed to British settlement, as had been done so successfully by the artists of Port Jackson, would have been useless. Instead, another response seems to have been employed.

It is difficult to imagine that artists such as Lycett might have come up with the idea of banishing any reminder of the current conflict from their paintings. There would have been no benefit for them ideologically or financially – unless this was a direct instruction from those commissioning his work, or a demand for such depiction according to the taste of their audience.



<sup>27</sup> See Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People: A Radical Examination of the Tasmanian Wars*.

It has already been noted that Lycett was in the service of the Governor during his time in Sydney. The only surviving letter by the artist, sent to Wilmot Horton, undersecretary to Earl Bathurst on 18 June 1824, hints at the purpose of his publication. In the letter, he requests that the material for publication be passed on to the Earl for his inspection so that it might be appropriately dedicated to his name. Endorsement of the work at such a level ensured that it would be influential and effectively secured it as an authoritative tool in promoting the success of the colony. Lycett is described as Governor Macquarie's artist and the descriptions of each of the views are provided in the first person, suggesting an authentic, eye-witness account. The land is described in terms of its fertility for crops and grazing, as well as the sporting pleasure afforded by wildfowl and other game. Van Diemen's Land was presented as a land of industry and recreation.

Simply put, Lycett's brief was likely to have been to calm the perception of the colony in the face of increasing conflict, and in so doing, attract more settlers with which to overwhelm increasing Aboriginal resistance. McPhee provides a tantalising suggestion that the Van Diemen's Land Company had been actively seeking to overcome negative assessments of the investment potential on the island that had been made by Governor Sorell. The Company was intent on investing in grazing operations in the north of the island. To do this, they planned to secure large land grants, which required Bathurst's agreement. McPhee cites company minutes from 18 December 1824 stating that, 'it was therefore necessary to satisfy Lord Bathurst that Col. Sorell was mistaken to which purpose.'<sup>28</sup> The minutes go on to resolve that a number of people involved in mercantile promotion of Van Diemen's Land be contacted to further this. The list includes the name of Joseph Lycett. McPhee concludes that the Van Diemen's Land Company were using Lycett's views, 'as they were probably intended: as a promotional brochure to encourage investment in Australian and, in particular, Tasmanian pastoral activity'.<sup>29</sup>

It is perhaps ironic, give the artist's repeated convictions for forgery, that he might have been complicit in a fraud perpetrated at a much higher and more sophisticated level, to represent Van Diemen's Land as land empty of anyone who might stand in the way of colonial success.

It was particularly important to promote such associations in Van Diemen's Land, which according to *Blackwoods Magazine* in 1827, was 'the abode of felons, a moral evil; which, in spite of other advantages, still compel many to forgo the little less than paradise which it presents.'<sup>30</sup> For Neville, Lycett's views 'did not invite philosophic contemplation from their audience, ' but were about 'the more prosaic interest in describing the normalcy of colonial life in Australia.'<sup>31</sup> Nowhere was the need to argue a state of normalcy more acute than in Van Diemen's Land.

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<sup>28</sup> John McPhee, 'Joseph Lycett: A Biography', *ibid.* p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Blackwoods Magazine*, November 1827, p. 606, cited in Neville *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.



John Glover, *Mount Wellington and Hobart from Kangaroo Point*, 1835, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Australia & Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

The landscape painting of John Glover is well known for the inclusion of Aboriginal figures in his paintings. Glover almost single-handedly reverses the absence of Tasmanian Aborigines from landscape painting when he arrives in Van Diemen's Land near the end of the Black War in 1831. His most celebrated painting is probably *Mount Wellington and Hobart from Kangaroo Point*. The thriving industry of Hobart Town, its port bustling with ships, and its houses reaching upwards into the valleys and foothills of Mt. Wellington, is bathed in the morning light signalling a prosperous future. In the foreground is juxtaposed a group of Tasmanian Aborigines caught in the act of wild celebration, as they dance and luxuriate around the campfire, enjoying the spoils of the hunt and swimming joyfully in the waters of the Derwent River. It is a bizarre scene, as there is surely nothing to celebrate. The growth of Hobart in the distance has only been possible through the destruction of their culture and kin. The scene, painted in 1835, is a fantasy. The only place where Tasmanian Aborigines could gather in such numbers now was in forced exile on Flinders Island. And there was little cause for celebration there.

Kenneth Clark innocently considered that 'landscape painting marks the stages in our conception of nature... part of a cycle in which the human spirit attempted once more to create a harmony with its environment'.<sup>32</sup> The artists at work in Tasmania cannot be seen in this light. Their work corresponds more closely with a critical thesis argued by W. J. T. Mitchell, that 'landscape is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism.'<sup>33</sup> While the task of these artists was to create a profile of the colony's resources, usually at the behest of governors, or other officers, they were also subject to direction, potentially placing their visual record at odds with what they would normally have expected to include in their pictures, and even what they might have seen or heard.

All of this occurred against a backdrop of persistent attitudes that considered Aborigines in Australia, and Tasmania in particular, to be incapable of participating in the colonial process of civilisation. This persistence of Dampier's characterization of Ignoble savagery, coupled with settler paranoia resulting from increasing resistance from Tasmanian Aborigines, soon transformed into not only a desire for their complete disappearance, but active measures to achieve this.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: John Murray, 1949). p. viii.

<sup>33</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape', in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). p. 5.

The story of visual representation of Tasmanian Aborigines in early nineteenth-century landscape painting is therefore an ambiguous one in which, perversely, the original occupants are referred to by their absence. As John Berger argued,

It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world within words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.<sup>34</sup>

The assumption of *terra nullius* by Cook on his arrival in Tasmania created an appetite for the disappearance of Aborigines even before the process of colonization was begun. Once this process had commenced, correspondence and reports that Aborigines were not acting in a way consistent with what might be expected of parlous savages with no sense of history or home; but instead were actively defending their country, were countered with a visual rhetoric that denied this reality. The landscape painters of VDL before Glover were complicit in this.

Once Aboriginal people were safely imprisoned on Flinders Island, it was no longer necessary to hide their presence. Ironically, it was only after their bodily removal from the landscape that Glover was able to reinscribe them into the colony's visual life – but as a memorial – a kind of melancholy expression of regret at the sad, but inevitable necessity that Dampier's miserable savages were destined to yield to colonial progress.

An image of nature has,  
like Narcissus's reflection,  
the status of something possessed  
and yet not possessed,  
of something seeking to snare  
what remains always elusive.

David Reason, 'Echo and Reflections', in Roy F. Ellen and David Reason (eds.), *Classifications in Their Social Context* (London: Academic Press, 1987). p. 168.

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<sup>34</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972). p.7.