Bury me behind the Mountains: the Australian Aborigines, the City and the 1988 Bicentennial

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Abstract

On 16 May 1871 the Illustrated Australian News reproduced an engraving illustrating ‘A Surgeon’s Hut in the Bush’. The accompanying text observed that Victoria still retained ‘in its bush life, photographs, so to speak, of the manners and customs which prevailed during the period when the gold fever was raging at its height.1 The writer commented on the fact that the difference between such ‘unpretending habitations’ and ‘the princely mansions in Collins Street East’ afforded ‘a vivid mental panorama of the gigantic strides Victoria has made during the last twenty years’. It is easy to deride such naive perceptions of time and change. Writing 101 years later in Punch, Stephen Toulmin (an Englishman) declared that ‘any self-respecting people must find it embarrassing to possess a national history less than five centuries old’.2 He was writing of America but his assumptions can also be applied to Australia, and especially so as its Bicentennial year of 1988 approaches. This essay attempts to throw some light on what meanings 1988 might have for Australians by examining attitudes to the past and the present expressed by Australian city-dwellers in the period leading up to 1888.
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Such a procedure may seem perverse, but Ian Turner once wisely observed that ‘to investigate dreams about the future is just another way of studying past and present reality’. He also suggested that ‘a law of diminishing returns’ applies to the celebration of national anniversaries. Geoffrey Blainey argued in 1980 that Australians have been ‘slow to realize that the land has had at least two separate histories, and that the history which began with the raising of the British flag represents, at most, a fragment’. In his Boyer Lectures for the ABC that same year Bernard Smith emphasised that 1988 was ‘an important date in the history of black and white alike in this country, though for different reasons’. He expressed the fear that ‘only a major event like the coming
together of black and white in the ratification of ... an historic treaty' [on Aboriginal sovereign rights] could prevent the bicentennial from being seen by the Aborigines as 'the whites celebrating 200 years of oppression'.

Blainey had described the meeting between the British and the Aborigines as a confrontation between 'the first industrial nation of the world and the last continent of nomads', and the conflicting priorities of the two civilizations remain the chief reason why Aboriginal culture still does not feature in the felt history of most white Australians. The invading imperialistic culture in Australia valued material artefacts and visible organizational ability, not only a civic sense but also (as early New Zealand respect for the Maoris showed) a certain military spirit. Australian Aboriginal culture offered no such checks to the spirit of free enterprise and 'progress'; 'the Australians of the late nineteenth century looked on the cities that they had built, and found them good.'

Bruce Dawe once observed that it was 'an excess of virtue' that produced suburbia, 'the desire of man not to be a wanderer on the face of the earth but to have a kingdom of his own'; such intimations of the spiritual possibilities of suburbia have not featured largely in Australian culture, however. Yet from the beginning the city was the everyday landscape of most Australians, as it still is today. This unchanging fact helps to explain both an enduring imaginative interest (of which films provide a recent example) in the Bush, and the remoteness of that same Bush (including Aboriginal culture) from most Australian life. It is significant rather than merely coincidental, then, that at about the time that the now-deserted banks of Ophir Creek, New South Wales, were echoing to the cries of excited prospectors, crowds from all over Europe were thronging the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park for the 1851 Great Exhibition of Art and Industry. From gold came 'the high urbanization which is characteristic of Australia', but from London came the investment and the technology that made such urbanization possible. In Australian literature and art the goldminer became a heroic part of the national legend, but in economic terms he was always destined to be a small cog in an urban-centred, multinational machine. While the early rushes lasted the digger could assume the role of a bold individualist (and often was) but as deeper leads required capital investment in the sophisticated technology displayed at the London Exhibition the Australian gold-miner, like other labourers all over the empire, worked for wages in a structure where fortunes were made only in stocks and shares. It is a situation that has changed little; RTZ still features prominently in any Australian landscape, for industrialists and investors, if not for artists.
The fifty years from the excitement in Ophir Creek to the opening of the first Federal Parliament in 1901 saw great artistic activity in Australia, and not least among photographers. The industrial processes of early photography bore witness to urban technology and resources as clearly as the Polaroid instant-print camera does today. Equally, those very processes were, from the start, applied not only to recording the growing cityscape but also to surveying and ‘capturing’ those unsettled aspects of the continent which simultaneously threatened and fascinated the city dweller.12

Even at the time of the gold rushes, some Australians were aware of how quickly their surroundings were changing, and saw photography as the best way of fixing a vanishing past. ‘What the contemporary observer sees is not necessarily the truth, but the historian neglects it at his peril’;13 looking at the neat late eighteenth-century settlements depicted in Thomas Watling’s paintings, Bernard Smith has asked, ‘I wonder what they really looked like?’14 Photography is the only record of what the contemporary observer saw, of what things really looked like, until the first Australian newsreel recorded the Melbourne Cup of 1896.

Painting presented a more selective vision of Australia. In a book published in 1916, one year before his death, the painter Fred McCubbin sought to trace the debt of later Australian artists to what he termed the early ‘pioneer pictures’ of S.T. Gill, Nicolas Chevalier, Eugen Von Guerard, and others.15 In doing so he drew a distinction between such pictures of ‘nature in her grander rather than in her homely moods’ and the images which he saw as having the greatest appeal and power for Australians. The early Australian artists, McCubbin felt, ‘ignored, because they did not understand, the effects of man in his relation to Nature — the sun-bleached landscapes, the farm with its neighbouring clump of gum trees, the fields that merge into wayward forests, the winding road with its bullock waggons, men and women toiling, horses and cattle’. It was to this neglect of ‘all the things that savour of man’ that he attributed the fact that ‘these early pictures do not arouse our sympathies, for it is precisely the pictures of things familiar to us, of homely subjects ... which most appeal...’.

McCubbin did not have photography in mind, but his words define perfectly the appeal of genre photography, in which the ordinary routines and events of everyday life were captured by the camera. They also reveal that in selecting ‘all the things that savour of man’ certain unstated preconceptions operated. McCubbin’s vision of ‘homely subjects’, for example, excludes urban and industrial scenes, which presumably savoured of man in unacceptable ways. His remarks indicate, though, a
general preference for what in art is now termed 'genre', namely works 'depicting scenes from daily life' and seeking to raise 'the representation of ... the worker to a new heroic dignity'. The Oxford Companion to Art, from which these phrases are taken, recognizes that since the end of the nineteenth century the most important developments in genre 'have taken place in the art of the film', but still photography has an important earlier role here. Indeed, like genre painting, it can usefully be seen as a form of historical art which finds its appropriate subjects not in the great (and, by definition, distant) events of 'History' but in what McCubbin termed 'incidents by country road sides, weather-worn farm houses, familiar farm yards, fields in which men are working'. The colonial artist faced difficulties in finding subjects grand enough for history paintings, as shown by the problems William Strutt encountered in finding purchasers for his monumental history painting 'Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851'. Interestingly, the London Weekly Dispatch for 10 July 1864 commented of this work when it was first exhibited in the Haymarket that the 'chief merit' of the picture lay 'in its fidelity to the aspect of colonial life', adding that, as a glimpse of 'the visitations that befall our kith and kin abroad', it possessed 'an interest independent of its pictorial claims'.

It was possible for McCubbin, writing in 1916, to recall wistfully those Australian landscape pictures which for him captured what he termed 'the salient living features of this country', but it was on the more populous, and certainly less picturesque, mullock heaps of the goldfields that a new kind of painting first emerged in Australia. It was not until late in the century, though, that artists in Australia began to think of urban scenes as a possible source of national characteristics, and not until the immigrant artist Sali Hermann saw Sydney with European eyes in the late 1930s that inner city slums featured in Australian high art. The Aboriginal people had to wait even longer for serious artistic treatment, though the chief public market for photographs was always in aspects of bush life, in which they featured, albeit as curios in their own country.

By 1864 the practice of photographing the Aborigines in groups was sufficiently established for the Melbourne Punch of 19 May to carry a cartoon depicting some of the hazards relating to that particular branch of the 'foe-tographic' art. Ten years later the Australasian Sketcher for 18 April 1874 printed an engraving showing 'A Bush Photograph' of Aborigines, describing the scene as 'a characteristic phase of Australian bush life': A travelling photographer on the lookout for subjects has come upon a camp of natives ... their grim figures will ... be photographed, to serve as ethnological specimens and curios to send to friends in England as
example of the rapidly disappearing Australian race.' As this quotation indicates, interest in the Aborigines (at least to the extent of buying photographs of them) was quickened by the belief that the whole race would become extinct in the near future: 'the rapidity with which the aboriginal retires from off the face of the earth before the progress of civilization will soon give an archaeological value to such illustrations.'

Disturbing though the equation of such ‘progress’ with ‘civilization’ is, such articles do reflect a growing sense of historical perspective with regard to the Aborigines at a popular level; to that extent they are part of that wider historical awareness of the recent past which formed an important element in the national consciousness of the late nineteenth century.

That the juxtaposition of expanding urban settlements and the accompanying shelters of the Aborigines led almost irresistibly to a consideration of the history of the former (though not the latter) is suggested by a comment in the Australasian Sketcher for 26 August 1882. Referring to an illustration of ‘The Native Encampment, Zoological Gardens, Royal Park’ the journal observed that it was ‘only necessary to compare this aboriginal encampment with the greater, more durable, and permanent encampment of colonists which we call Melbourne, lying a mile away’ to have what it termed ‘a curious illustration presented to the mind of the past and present of Melbourne’.

The contrast between the two settlements is taken to ‘illustrate’ the speed with which the city of Melbourne has overtaken the still-primitive settlements of the Aborigines. In an article published on 15 January 1881 the Australasian Sketcher had expressed only too bluntly the irrelevance of Aboriginal culture to the commercially dominant urban centres:

As he stands in the white man’s cast-off rags, gibbering out a request for white money, there is none of the nobility of the savage about him. He is only an unpicturesque vagrant, and, thus contemplated, it does not occasion much regret that his disappearance as a member of the human family is not remote.

It is this ‘unpicturesque vagrant’ who is depicted in Julian Ashton’s 1887 painting ‘Give ‘Em Bacca Boss’ and who poses by his mia-mia (as an exotic ‘curio’) in so many landscape photographs of the period.

These brief ‘photographs’ from Australia’s past have shown the advancement of ‘settlement’ and of ‘civilization’ to be two distinct processes. The impact of urban development and valued upon the Australian Aboriginal people is clear enough. That the Aborigines have confounded the expectations of one hundred years ago, and today are not only survivors but are arguing a case which attracts increasingly wide
support, allows hope for the future. For that hope to be transformed into action, though, demands something more rare than Stephen Toulmin's second-hand self-respect, based merely on a year count. It demands an informed assessment of the nation's past — and so of possible national fixtures — shaped by the vision that all Australians have of themselves after 200 years.

Such a vision must inevitably accept and value the city as the expression of the civilization that settlers have made in Australia, and must respond to it with an imaginative scope that does justice both to its special riches and to the fact that those riches are still denied to most native Australians. This is to be truly urbane.

In his autobiography, Patrick White writes of his own attempts, in The Vivisector, to 'paint a portrait' of Sydney ('my city', as he calls it). In their vivid contradictions his words capture something of the intensity with which the urban scene must be apprehended if it is indeed to be a deeply felt part of Australian life, and a possible theatre for acts of real civilization. I close with his words:

my city: wet, boiling, superficial, brash, beautiful, ugly Sydney, developing during my lifetime from a sunlit village into this present-day parvenu bastard, compound of San Francisco and Chicago. I had a lot of exploring to do. It was not so much research as re-living the windswept, gritty or steamy moods of the streets, coaxing dead-ends, narrow lanes, and choked thoroughfares to release those voices, images, emotions of the past, which for my deplorably atypical Australian nature evoke guilt rather than pleasure.

NOTES

1. Illustrated Australian News, 16 May 1871, p.10. The engraving appeared on p.4.
3. Ian Turner, The Australian Dream (Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968), p.ix; the following quotation is on the previous page.
7. I realise that there are exceptions here. In The Spectre of Truganini Bernard Smith devotes his final chapter to 'cultural convergence', a phrase he takes with admiration from the work of Les Murray. See Murray, 'The Human-hair Thread', Meanjin, Melbourne, Aboriginal Issue, Vol.36, No 4, December 1977, 569.


11. The role of international corporations as major buyers of art of course means that artists, too, have to consider them. For a revealing foray into the largely unexplored area of ‘art values’ and commercial values see Bernard Smith, ‘Art Marketing in Sydney, 1970-1975’ in my *Readings in Australian Arts* (Exeter, 1978), pp.74-83.

12. ‘As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.’ This remark appears on page nine of Susan Sontag’s book *On Photography* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979). Although I disagree with Sontag’s conclusions often, her book is a fine and stimulating account of photography’s part in our lives.


18. See Smith, ‘On perceiving the Australian suburb’, pp.84-6. Smith quotes (p.85) the *Bulletin* as describing Herman’s painting ‘McElhone Stairs’ (1944) as ‘a melancholy account of one of Sydney’s slummiest aspects’; the painting won the Wynne Art Prize that year.


24. I am aware that to make the riches of the city directly available to all Aborigines (i.e. to make them urban dwellers) is no solution. The city is here referred to as the focus of national wealth; exactly how that wealth can best be used to help redress the wrongs suffered by the Aboriginal people is a problem to which there are no easy solutions. That is not to say it is insoluble, though.


The above is the text of a paper given at an international Seminar on Australian literature held at the University of Stirling, Scotland, 9-12 September 1983. Writing this footnote after the Seminar, I am no less uneasy about the status according the Aborigines in discussion of Australian culture. I believe, however, that the rapid growth of interest in migrant writing in Australia (ironical though it seems) helps to establish a point of view...
which can do justice to Aboriginal culture. In this context I wish to record my admiration for the paper on 'Migrant Writing' given at the Stirling Seminar by Sneja Gunew of Deakin University, Melbourne. Had I the time to redraft this text, such a bald acknowledgement would be unnecessary.