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Artists with Axes*

TIM BONYHADY

*Urban Research Program
Australian National University
Canberra, ACT, 0200, Australia*

SUMMARY

Nineteenth century artists have been widely identified as agents of environmental protection, particularly in the United States. But while their paintings and photographs sometimes helped to secure the protection of particular places, artists often showed little respect for the environment when they set about securing their views. This destructiveness may lie behind even those works which seem to express greatest awe before nature – causing us to reassess both the role of art and our attitude to it.

After fixing our points of view and holding a council of war in reference to the execution of some trees which obstructed the view in one or two directions, and which we decided should be lowered on the morrow, we returned to the camp, and the evening was devoted to a grand clothes drying match.

(J.H. Harvey, *Australian Photographic Journal*, 1895)

The engraving shows 'Our Artist'. Charles Walter was a German from Mecklenberg who settled in Victoria in the 1850s. When not collecting new specimens for Ferdinand Mueller, Victoria's Government Botanist, Walter worked as a 'Country Photographic Artist'. Much of his market seems to have been local landholders to whom he offered 'Views of Residence Seats and Scenery ... in any parts of the colony, at Moderate Terms'. But Walter also contributed to the monthly *Illustrated Australian News* which made something of an identity of him – hence the engraving which the *News* published in 1873 as one of nine illustrations to an article by Walter about a trip to Cape Otway, south-west of Melbourne.¹

*This article is a revised version of the Canberra School of Art's Annual Lecture for 1994



FIGURE 1
'Our Artist', *Illustrated Australian News* 31 December 1873

ARTISTS WITH AXES

The engraving shows Walter with a box on his back, a tent over his shoulder, a tomahawk in hand. The box and tent are easily explained as essential tools of Walter's trade. The box contained his photographic equipment – his camera, glass plates, processing trays and chemicals which he needed because wet-plates had to be processed immediately as the emulsion on them was sensitive to light only when wet. The tent was Walter's portable darkroom. But what of the tomahawk?

The only contemporary accounts of Walter's work as a photographer suggest that he used his tomahawk simply to clear his path as he made his way to places rarely, if ever, visited by his fellow colonists. On a trip to Mount Buller in 1868, he 'penetrated to places inaccessible to vehicle or horse, and only penetrable to human foot, after considerable clearances had been effected in the thickets by means of a tomahawk'. When he went to Cape Otway in 1873, he made his way 'through a dense undergrowth of scrub from six to eight feet high' with 'tomahawk in hand'. Even some of the tracks were so overgrown that 'saplings had to be cleared out of the way'.²

Walter's tomahawk also symbolised the larger difficulties he encountered on expeditions which the *Illustrated Australian News* liked to present as a public service. The *News's* image of Walter – like that developed around other colonial landscape painters and photographers who made similar expeditions – was that of the selfless artist who risked life and limb so that his fellow colonists could discover 'the romantic and the picturesque' which Nature had scattered 'so lavishly' around them. Out for two, even three months at a time, Walter travelled alone, sleeping 'at squatters stations, in shanties, or under a gum tree' and relying on such provisions as he could procure by the way. As the *News* put it, just to see Walter with his 'heavy and cumbersome apparatus' was to wonder 'how he managed to get there'.³

The pursuit of the romantic and the picturesque by photographers such as Walter did not, however, always involve a corresponding respect for nature, at least of the type we know today. Even some of the photographers most concerned for the protection of the environment did not carry tomahawks and axes simply to clear their paths. They – or sometimes their patrons or assistants – also used them for view-making in the most literal sense, for felling trees in order to expand the horizon.

One example is the artists' camp in the Grose Valley in the Blue Mountains organised by Eccleston du Faur, who played a key role in securing institutional support for both art and environmental protection in New South Wales in the late nineteenth century. While du Faur's day job was Chief Draughtsman in the Crown Lands Office, he also served as the honorary secretary of the New South Wales Academy of Art from 1872; the *de facto* director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1876 until 1892, and President of its Trustees and the Gallery's chief policy-maker until his death in 1915. Du Faur was also the main advocate of the dedication of Ku-ring-gai Chase as a National Park for northern

Sydney, just as Royal National Park served the city's south. When the Chase was gazetted in 1894, less than two years after du Faur first advocated its creation, he became its managing trustee and 'devoted the greater part of his time to it'. While one of his objects was to open the Chase as a recreation ground, du Faur also had 'a higher mission'. Exceptionally for his day he 'aimed above all at the fullest preservation of natural flora and at the establishment of an area over which marsupials and other Australian fauna might roam and breed in safety'.⁴

Du Faur organised his artists' camps in the Grose Valley in 1875 to show that it was at least the equal of the Yosemite Valley in California which had become a State park a decade before, partly through the agency of art. As part of campaigning for protection of Yosemite and the Mariposa Grove of great sequoia trees, a group of Californians led by the landscape architect, Frederic Olmstead, had sent photographs of Yosemite taken by Carleton Watkins to several influential senators. These mammoth plates – up to 18 by 22 inches – persuaded Senator John Conness to introduce the legislation that made Yosemite a park in 1864. The following year Olmstead turned to Watkins and the landscape painters, Virgil Williams and Thomas Hill, for advice on how the beauty of Yosemite could best be preserved.⁵

Yosemite was known to Australian colonists through both photographs and engravings as well as many published accounts. In 1871 the National Gallery of Victoria bought 20 of Watkins's giant plates including seven views of Yosemite. In 1872 one of the Batchelder brothers exhibited a panorama at the Sydney School of Arts which included the 'celebrated' Yosemite Valley where 'every natural object' was 'on the most colossal scale'. In 1873 the *Illustrated Australian News* and the *Illustrated Sydney News* both carried an engraving of Yosemite – possibly based on a photograph by Watkins – which, they declared, contained 'more scenes of grandeur and beauty' than could 'be found within an equal space in any other part of the world'. In the same year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* serialised 'A Holiday Tour Round the World' by John Smith – Professor of Chemistry at Sydney University and a significant amateur photographer – which included two chapters about his stay at Yosemite which he believed was unmatched for compressing 'so much varied grandeur and beauty ... into so small a scale'.⁶

Du Faur wanted to reveal the Grose Valley not just to his fellow colonists but also to the world at large. While both paintings and photographs of the Grose were shown in Sydney and Melbourne, he wanted photographs of the valley to be included in the New South Wales display at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876. Inspired by the giant plates taken by Watkins, he persuaded the Commissioners responsible for the New South Wales exhibit to employ the Sydney photographer, Joseph Bischoff, to go to the Grose Valley. While Bischoff's 12 by 16 inch plates were almost half the size of Watkins's photographs, they still were twice the size of most Australian colonial photographs. Just to carry Bischoff's plates required five men.⁷

Du Faur also needed to get his artists to spots where they could record the ‘stupendous size’ of the 2,000 feet high cliffs. While surveyors had cut a track to the bottom of the valley in 1857, it was ‘overgrown, encumbered by fallen trees, and obliterated in part by landslips’. Moreover, even if the artists were able to reach the valley floor, the ‘density of the scrub and forest timber’ meant that there were few spots from which ‘the abruptness of the cliffs on either side and the narrowness of the gorge’ could ‘fairly be appreciated’.⁸

Du Faur’s solution was to employ a work gang not only to re-open the old track into the valley but also to clear ‘views to be taken by pencil and camera’ at sites which he selected. The first artist to arrive was the Tasmanian landscape painter, W.C. Piquenit, who seems to have worked happily on his own without engaging in further clearing. But when most of the rest of the party arrived ten days later, they spent the entire afternoon creating new views at their second camp at the junction of the Grose River and Govett’s Leap Creek. Three days later du Faur and five companions renewed their axe-work closer to Govett’s Leap Falls.⁹

By the time the Sydney photographer, Ernest Docker, joined du Faur, ‘a large number of trees’ had been felled at the party’s first camp. On his way to the second camp, Docker noticed ‘several points cleared and marked for taking’. Du Faur proudly recorded that his party did not just ‘clear’, but ‘properly cleared’, views of the two main waterfalls in the gorge.¹⁰

The results of this axe-work are most obvious in a panorama by Joseph Bischoff taken from the first camp looking from the north-east through to the south towards Mount King Gorge. The foreground is all stumps and felled tree trunks – a strip several metres wide has been cleared across the full breadth of the panorama to obtain the view of the cliffs.¹¹

While Docker recognised the benefits of this work in ‘opening to view some grand crags with broken and picturesque skyline’, he also emphasised its costs in ‘unfortunately supplying a very inartistic foreground’.¹² This response was probably unusual. Contemporary descriptions of some of Nicholas Caire’s ‘Views in Victoria’, which are similarly full of stumps, overlook these foregrounds for the ‘beautiful and romantic’ scenery behind.¹³ Du Faur’s one disappointment was that, notwithstanding ‘a considerable amount of clearing’ at the first camp, his party had opened only a partial panorama of the surrounding cliffs. As he regretfully informed a *conversazione* held by the New South Wales Academy of Art late in 1875, just ‘a few days’ more work would have opened up the sky ... all round the compass, forming a view of cliffs of 2000 feet high all round, not easily to be surpassed’. Four years later, du Faur was still lamenting that his party – although numbering 16 at its peak – was ‘altogether inadequate for making the clearings in timber and scrub, without which many of the finest views could not be favourably reproduced by photography’.¹⁴

This appetite for view construction by axe-work was not unique to Australia. Take the Anglo-American photographer, Eadward Muybridge. Although best



FIGURE 2

known for his studies of human and animal locomotion, Muybridge made his name with a series of photographs of Yosemite which he took in 1872. By then, Yosemite and Mariposa Grove had been State Parks for eight years – committed by the Federal government to the State of California ‘for their constant preservation, that they may be exposed to public view, and that they may be used and preserved for the benefit of mankind’.¹⁵ But because California was yet to appoint a guardian to take care of Yosemite, Muybridge was able to disregard this injunction with impunity.

Muybridge took up his axe out of competitiveness with Carleton Watkins – it was just one of his ways of obtaining new views which would distinguish him from his rival. As the San Francisco newspaper, the *Alta California* put it, Muybridge ‘had himself lowered by ropes down precipices to establish his instruments in places where the full beauty of the object to be photographed could be transferred to the negative’; he went ‘to points where his packers refused to follow him; and ... carried the apparatus himself rather than ... forego the picture on which he has set his mind’. Not least, he ‘cut down trees by the score’ that interfered with his cameras.¹⁶

Such destructiveness was not confined to professional photographers who at least had a commercial justification for their actions. Amateurs such as J.H. Harvey, the honorary secretary of the Victorian Amateur Photographic Association, were just as ready to use axes to open new views. When Harvey and another ‘leading and pioneering’ amateur visited Kanangara Walls in the Blue Moun-



Joseph Bischoff, *The Grose Valley* 1875

tains in 1894, the two men began by selecting views which they wanted to take when the weather cleared. As part of the larger sport of their trip, written up by Harvey as a kind of boy's own adventure, they decided on the 'execution' of some obstructive trees. After marking their victims that evening, they felled them the following morning and took their photographs.¹⁷

This axe-work is all the more noteworthy because Harvey was appalled, three days later, when he discovered that 'vandals' had destroyed Dante's Glen, a fern gully near Grenville which had been 'a real beauty spot' when he had first visited it in the early 1880s. Harvey declared it 'shameful' that the rough barricade of stakes, which had protected the Glen on his first visit, had been removed due to the opposition of tourists who 'wished to be free to roam about any portion of the gully' and had ruined its 'luxuriant vegetation' in the process. One explanation of this apparent inconsistency may be that Harvey valued fern gullies more than eucalypts – a common nineteenth century preference. However, it may also be that he put Art before Nature.¹⁸

Photographers found another use for their axes when, far from being obstructed, their foregrounds were empty and hence devoid of interest according to the conventions of the picturesque derived from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape painting. For photographers who wanted to mimic this style of painting, the only remedy was to introduce some foreground vegetation to lead the eye into the view. But photographers also had their own reasons to fill their foregrounds, at least when taking stereographs, as the depth of field which made

these photographs so popular could be established only if there was an immediate reference point in the foreground from which the middleground and background could be measured.¹⁹

This type of re-arrangement of nature was cheerfully admitted by John Watt Beattie who not only was Hobart's leading photographer from the 1880s to the 1910s but who also was one of the great advocates of scenery preservation and the dedication of national parks in Tasmania. In a lecture in Hobart in 1897, Beattie explained that he always carried an axe so that he could 'soon remedy any faulty composition'. His favourite targets were grass trees because they were 'so handy for foregrounds' – as one can see in his photographs of Lake Emily in the Hartz Mountains and Lake Marion and Mount Gould which lie to the north-west of Lake St Clair.²⁰

The hunt for giant trees also brought out the photographers' axes when surrounding vegetation obstructed their views. Recording and destruction went together in 1888 when the Commissioners responsible for Melbourne's Centennial Exhibition employed the photographer, J. Duncan Peirce, to find Victoria's tallest tree. Peirce's assistants not only cleared his views but then posed proudly with their axes amidst their handiwork in a number of his photographs. Victoria's first Conservator of Forests, G.S. Perrin, was equally destructive when he joined this hunt in the Sassafras Valley in the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne in 1889. When Perrin 'saw that the trees were very tall, he set four men to work to clear the scrub and undergrowth away so as to allow both a theodolite and a camera to work on them'.²¹

If instructional essays and photographic manuals published in the late nineteenth century are any guide, such axe-work was far from a quirk of just a few photographers. In an essay on 'Landscape Photography' published in the *Philadelphia Photographer*, James Mullens recommended:

The foreground being on of the main points in a picture ... if not naturally [attractive, can be made so] by a little labor in the way of rolling up an old log or stump in an effective position ... and let me advise you here to always have with you on your photographic trips a spade and a good axe: the latter particularly will often be found 'a friend in need', when it is desirable to cut a small tree or remove a branch that would otherwise obscure some important point of your view.

The British critic, Alfred Wall similarly advised that it was sometimes 'desirable to fill up a spot' which was 'too startlingly conspicuous'. His solution was to plug the gap 'by moving a bush, the trunk of a felled tree, some broken or displaced boughs, some transplanted weeds ... in some naturally suggestive way'.²²

All this evidence of artist-axemen means that when I look at a 'Bridge over the Delegate at Quedong', an engraving which the *Illustrated Australian News* published in 1871 after a photograph by Charles Walter, I suspect that Walter did not use his tomahawk just to clear his path. Even though Walter was an early member of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria – the main Victorian organisa-

tion which campaigned for protection of the environment in the late nineteenth century – I think that Walter was happy to use his blade to construct his views. The double stump in left foreground, if not also the one behind, were probably his handiwork – left by him in opening his view of the river and the bridge.²³

I am equally suspicious of the grass tree in Morton Allport's stereoscope, *Mount Ida (Lake St Clair)*, taken in Tasmania in 1862. It is not just that this grass tree looks as if it may be propped up by the log in front of it but also that this grass tree is so perfectly positioned to satisfy the conventions of the picturesque. Already in 1863 the Tasmanian monthly, *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, declared this stereograph 'the most beautiful and artistic' of Allport's photographs.²⁴ More recently, Ann-Marie Willis recognised that it was one of Allport's few photographs to take 'full advantage of the stereoscopic effect because it has been defined with a clearly defined foreground (a large grass tree), middle distance (bushes and a man in a boat on the lake) and background (mountain)'.²⁵

I have the same suspicions when I look at the work of Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson, two of the American photographers most often identified with the rise of environmental concerns because of the role played by their work in the protection of Yosemite and Yellowstone. Not only do a number of photographs by Watkins and Jackson include axes but the stumps, which occupy the foregrounds of several of their views, suggest that Watkins and Jackson, or at least their assistants, also used them to reveal new scenery. Look, for example, at Watkins's photograph of Castle Rock on the Columbia River which he took during a four month trip to Oregon in 1867. Look at the felled trees in the foreground of the *Steamer Cascade at the Lower Landing, Columbia River*. Look, perhaps above all, at his photograph of Cape Horn where there is a real freshness about the stump in the left foreground.²⁶

Other cases may be impossible to detect if photographers resorted to axes but – sharing Ernest Docker's aesthetics – did so in such a way that the stumps and felled trunks could not be seen in their photographs. One example may be Eadward Muybridge. None of his photographs of Yosemite which I have seen reveal any obvious signs of the dozens of trees which he felled.

Landscape painters did not have the same need as photographers to shape their views in this way. They could shift position – making a foreground sketch from one spot while sketching their middle ground and distance from another. They could invent their foregrounds, omitting obstructions and introducing trees to frame their views and figures or animals to enliven them. Comparison of preliminary drawings and finished paintings reveals that these practices were commonplace among Australian colonial artists. They were also the norm in the United States where, as Barbara Novak has put it, Thomas Cole thought it 'kinder to let the ancient trees stand, altering them at will in composition, or imposing Claudian pastorales on them when the mood demanded. The artist made the necessary changes on canvas. Nature remained intact.'²⁷



FIGURE 3

Eugene von Guerard, *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges* 1857

Yet tomahawks were also part of the basic kit of landscape painters on sketching expeditions. When the Victorian artists, Eugene von Guerard and Nicholas Chevalier, accompanied Alfred Howitt on a trip from Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges to the Baw Baw plateau in 1858, Howitt recorded that von Guerard carried ‘a big knapsack, in front a roll of blankets – a sketchbook in a leather case at his side – round his waist a hunting knife – a tomahawk – a tobacco pouch’. Chevalier carried an even greater armoury: ‘shot and powder – knife and tomahawk in belt – gun on shoulder’.²⁸

While the artists needed these tomahawks to clear their paths, they probably also sometimes put them to other uses. One example may be *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges*, now in the National Gallery of Australia, which made von Guerard’s reputation when he first exhibited it in Melbourne in 1857. When von Guerard first went to the Dandenongs in 1855, they were already one of Melbourne’s main sources of palings and shingles so that timber-getters were hard at work, cutting tracks and searching out the tallest, straightest mountain ash. The site of von Guerard’s painting was known as ‘Dobson’s Gully’ after Thomas Dobson who had established a timber camp nearby in 1854.²⁹

As was so often the case, what attracted the timber-getter attracted the landscape painter. While von Guerard focussed on the tree ferns in his painting,

he made several drawings of the eucalypt forest and, in a subsequent discussion about Australia's big trees at the Royal Society of Victoria, observed that 'he had seen one 100 feet high, and 45 paces round, two miles from Ferntree Gully on the southern slope of the Dandenong Ranges'. That the Dandenongs were common ground for the timber-getter and the landscape painter was recognised by one contemporary account which described the area as visited only by 'the woodman, who repairs thither to fell their gigantic timber' and 'the adventurous artist, who visits them for the purpose of transferring to his canvas the marvels of their scenery'.³⁰

The potential for conflict between the artist and the timber-getter is illustrated by a cartoon in *Melbourne Punch* in 1858, drawn most likely by Nicholas Chevalier who was just starting out as a landscape painter in Victoria. Titled 'The Picturesque and the Practical', it shows how the artist, 'Mr Cobalt having made a pleasing sketch of a picturesque gum tree, returns two days afterwards to complete the picture, but finds the aspect of his subject has materially changed in the interval.' The tree has become a stack of palings.³¹

There seems, however, to have been no such conflict between von Guerard and Dobson. The artist not only sketched Dobson's hut but stayed with him, possibly for an extended period (as one later account records that he was there six months). Von Guerard and Dobson also had an identity of interest so far as certain clearing was concerned. According to James Smith, Melbourne's foremost art critic in the mid-nineteenth century, it was only because of 'the felling of some timber' that von Guerard could 'obtain a fore-ground sufficiently clear of obstructive objects' to allow him to include 'the distance in his range of vision' in *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges*.³²

We do not know who was responsible for this felling. Von Guerard may have simply exploited a view already opened by Dobson as part of his ordinary timber-getting. But von Guerard may have asked Dobson to fell these trees for him. He may even have taken up an axe himself – drawing on his experience on the Ballarat goldfields where, as part of helping to sink several deep shafts in 1853, he spent days 'felling trees, sawing the trunks into lengths, and splitting these into planks'. While von Guerard had regretted the destruction of the environment around Ballarat – the 'stretches of fine forest transformed into desolate-looking bare spaces, worked over and abandoned' – his reason was not so much the devastation of the landscape but that, for all their toil, so many miners, including himself, had left the diggings no richer and sometimes even poorer than when they started.³³

Whatever its origins, this axe-work did not trouble James Smith who, within a few years had become a powerful advocate of protection of Australia's forests. Possibly Smith remained unconcerned because the Gully continued to appear intact (even though the axe-work could not have been far off to allow von Guerard to get his view). Smith may also have thought the clearing in a good cause – assisting Art – and that, even if von Guerard had been involved, he had

done no more than put in practice the prevailing theory that it was the job of the artist not just to record Nature but to improve on it.

Other colonial landscape painters were also beneficiaries of this type of clearing, even if they did not take up axes themselves. When Eccleston du Faur established his artists' camps in the Grose Valley, his main object was not to attract photographers from Sydney but to entice W.C. Piquenit from Tasmania. According to one of du Faur's companions, who helped with the axe-work in the valley, their object was 'to clear views for the photographer *and* the sketcher'.³⁴

This nexus between axe-work, view-making and landscape painting was recognised by Francis Myers who, as 'Telemachus' in the Melbourne *Argus*, was one of the most influential writers about the Victorian countryside in the late nineteenth century. Like both du Faur and John Watt Beattie, Myers was a keen advocate of protection of the natural environment, who argued for the Dandenongs to be declared a 'people's park' and Wilson's Promontory to be declared a wildlife sanctuary.³⁵ But he also wanted more 'views', even if trees had to be felled to reveal them.

In writing about the Upper Yarra country between Marysville and the Black Spur, Myers commented

A few judicious axe strokes are badly wanted here ... toppling two or three trees by the roadside right over into the gorge, where the scrub growth would speedily bury them. If three trees were so removed, an uninterrupted view would be obtained of a valley and mountain which were designed by nature to prompt and gratify the painter's art. Just exactly suited to a moderate canvas ...

A little further on, Myers was again wanting 'a little judicious clearance'.³⁶

While Myers lamented that this type of work was 'in the category of nobody's business', elsewhere views were opened by a combination of private and public action. The authorities responsible for Australia's first reserves and national parks seem to have been particularly active. One of the primary objects of the trustees responsible for Royal National Park south of Sydney was to open new roads and walks and clear old ones so that 'with ease and safety' all visitors 'including ladies and young children' could enjoy the 'excellent views', 'charming vistas' and 'additional beautiful scenery'.³⁷

This role of the axe in view-making was probably equalled, if not surpassed, by that of the gun in natural history illustration. Before photography, the killing of specimens was generally a prerequisite to their documentation in paint. While some animals were trapped and then killed in the studio (either by suffocating them or piercing their hearts with a steel pin), most were shot in the field. When the natural history painter, John Lewin, sailed for New South Wales in 1799, his kit included 'A Long barreld gun 6 feet in the Barrel'.³⁸ The great trick of the zoological and ornithological illustrator was to restore life through art to what he had shot or had been killed on his behalf.

The embodiment of the marksman-artist was America's most famous bird

man, J.J. Audubon, who was not only a remarkable watercolourist but also an accomplished hunter whose field equipment included a shotgun, pistol, Dakota Indian war club, pipe-tomahawk and gun-shaped war club of the Mandan Indians. One mark of the significance of guns to Audubon's identity is that all major portraits of him show him with rifle in hand (instead of presenting him in a double role, with gun and portfolio). One of Audubon's watercolours for his *Birds of America* depicts the artist as trapper, with a gun and dead bird slung over his back and a tomahawk in his right hand (even though the golden eagle in the picture was one he had bought rather than caught).³⁹

While the killing of individual animals may be explained away as necessary for Audubon's art, his appetite for hunting was of much larger dimensions. Although he railed against the 'brutal propensity' of the Labrador 'eggers', whose object was 'to plunder every nest' and 'kill every bird' that came their way, Audubon's own narratives reveal that he delighted in 'rare sport', often went out in the field simply for the enjoyment of the chase and the kill, and exhibited little restraint when doing so. Even when he recognised that certain types of hunting were 'probably too well understood and too successfully practised in the United States', Audubon hoped to 'induce' his readers to take to the woods with their guns.⁴⁰

This passion for hunting is clearest in Audubon's account of his expedition to the Florida Keys – an area rich in ibises, godwits, flamingos, frigate pelicans and fish-crows. When Audubon first approached Indian Key, his 'heart swelled with uncontrollable delight' at so many new birds and he 'longed to make a more intimate acquaintance with them'. His method of doing so was crude. As he explained it, 'students of nature' spent 'little time in introduction'. 'In a trice', he and his companions had a boat at their service and just 'a short pull' had them on a large Key. A few minutes later, 'shot after shot might be heard, and down came whirling through the air the objects of our desire'.⁴¹

A few days later, Audubon and his friends turned their hand to 'egging' when their pilot took them to an area rich in ibis nests, 'each containing three large and beautiful eggs'. When 'all hands fell to gathering', the birds 'gave way' and before long they had 'a heap of eggs that promised delicious eating'. Their breakfast over, their pilot told them to prepare 'for fun'. As Audubon described it,

Each of us provided with a gun, posted himself behind a bush, and no sooner had the water forced the winged creatures to approach the shore, than the work of destruction commenced. When at length it ceased, the collected mass of birds of different kinds looked not unlike a small haycock.⁴²

Photography played no part in the decline of this kind of slaughter which went far beyond the demands of art. To begin with, photography was also too slow and cumbersome to be of much use in recording animals in the field. But with the invention of dry plates in the 1870s, photography offered a means not

just of recording animals while alive but also of catching movements too fast to be followed by the eye. Before long, the camera – literally as well as metaphorically – became a substitute for the breech-loader. One of the French pioneers of photography of birds in flight called his new camera a ‘photographic gun’. Soon there were endless word-plays about the different methods of ‘shooting’ – one which destroyed the target; the other which left it intact. The idea of ‘sport’ was also re-cast so that the challenge became that of pitting one’s skill against the natural shyness of the animal. In similar vein, the new breed of field naturalist-photographer delighted ‘in obtaining a big “bag” without harm to a single creature’.⁴³

Photography, therefore, worked both for and against preservation of the environment. So far as the landscape was concerned, the new technology was destructive where the old had been relatively benign. But when it came to natural history illustration, photography facilitated nature preservation, allowing animals to be recorded without even trapping them. So great was interest in photography among Australian ornithologists that their journal, the *Emu*, began carrying a regular column on ‘Camera Craft’. As the *Emu* described it in 1915, the number of ornithologists abandoning the rifle for the camera was ‘steadily on the increase’. It was ‘becoming recognized’ that the work of the naturalist who could ‘bring living animals before the eyes of others’ was ‘of higher value than the work of the collector of specimens’. By 1919 there was a Nature Photographer’s Club of Australia; by 1920 a book of their work edited by the nature writer, Charles Barrett, who made much of how ‘hunting with a camera’ satisfied the ‘instinct for the chase’ that lurked ‘in every man’ without causing that destruction of animal life which was ‘hateful to all lovers of Nature’.⁴⁴

Why does all this matter? After all, axes and guns were more or less ubiquitous in the nineteenth century. If all travellers including artists used them to get firewood and hunt up dinner, why should we care if painters and photographers also used them more directly for their art?

One reason is that we need to qualify if not abandon the assumption, widespread in writing about photography, that nature is immovable – that photographers have been limited to seeking out subjects which happened to conform to compositional conventions established by landscape painters. While photographers cannot move mountains, they can fell, uproot and transplant trees and have not always hesitated to do so. One example is probably the Anson Brothers’ view of Lake St Clair in Tasmania chosen by Ann-Marie Willis to demonstrate how photographers selected subjects which happened to comply with the picturesque, ‘seeking out elements such as framing trees, foreground logs, winding paths and rivers’.⁴⁵ Taken most likely by John Watt Beattie who became a partner in Anson Brothers in 1882, it looks to me as if Beattie did not simply find this subject. He constructed it, characteristically, by felling the tree in the centre both to clear the view down the lake and also to give interest to the foreground.

The enthusiasm of artists for the axe and the gun has, however, greater significance for our understanding of artists' attitude to the land – particularly in the United States where so much has been made of artists as key figures in the emergence of a new respect for nature. This connection between art and environmental concern has been a commonplace in the writing of both art history and environmental history since the late 1940s, when Hans Huth of the Art Institute of Chicago began publishing the articles which resulted in 1957 in his *Nature and the American*.⁴⁶ But its main public embodiment is much older: in 1886 George Bird Grinnell formed the Audubon Society for the Protection of Birds.⁴⁷

This identification and celebration of artists as conservationists has recently been attacked in the United States as part of the larger movement in art history which looks on nineteenth century artists as agents of imperialism, colonialism, capital (or, in the case of England, still the aristocracy). This revisionism is exemplified by the catalogue for the National Museum of American Art's 1992 exhibition, *America as the West*, in which Nancy Anderson equated artists such as Sanford Gifford, Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran with 'the miners, loggers, farmers, and ranchers who traveled cross-country to capitalise on the material resources of the American West'.⁴⁸

Anderson's identification of artists as one of many brands of carpet-bagger who flocked to the frontier rests on what these painters both included and omitted from their work. When they celebrated the sublime, Anderson argues that these artists were exploiting the land in the same way as resource-getters – 'mining' the landscape 'for the raw materials from which they fashioned studio paintings'. By failing to depict the despoilation of the environment, she suggests that they misled their public back east by implying that all was well on the frontier, that there was little or no conflict 'between the spectacular natural beauty of the land ... and the inevitable changes that accompanied the conversion of minerals, forests, and water ... that the West could endure both as symbol and resource'.⁴⁹

If the celebration of the artist as conservationist went too far – elevating an avid gun-man into the namesake of one of the most significant environmental organisations in the United States – so this revisionism is also too extreme. Just as to depict something may be to legitimise it, so to ignore something else may help to promote the belief that it does not exist. But it is nonsense to suggest that to omit something is as bad as to destroy it. Whatever the failings of artists on the American frontier, there is still a large gap between the devastation wrought by miners and loggers on the one hand and the artists' celebrations of nature on the other. Where miners and loggers laid waste, artists on the whole left the environment intact.

Much of the recent criticism of nineteenth century painters also begs the question what one can expect of artists – particularly those working on the frontier. Is it fair, for example, in the manner of Paul Fox and Jennifer Phipps in a recent Victorian exhibition, *Sweet Damp and Gossip*, to indict colonial artists

for their adoption of the picturesque even if this compositional device can fairly be characterised as an agent of dispossession ‘born of the eighteenth century enclosure movement and the subsequent construction of the gentleman’s park from communally used land’?⁵⁰ Is it reasonable to imply that artists should have quickly invented a new visual language for a new place (or, just as difficult, adopted one not identified with the rich and powerful)?

It is also worth asking what would have happened had painters – not just in the United States or Australia but in any of the white settler countries – tried to ‘expose’ the destruction which was occurring on the frontier. Almost certainly, they would have found no market for paintings of this type, at least in the mid-nineteenth century, and probably not even in the 1880s or 1890s. Then, as now, most artists were just small businessmen, at most minor entrepreneurs, who could not afford to paint works which they knew would not sell.

Not least, the type of revisionism exemplified by Anderson is remarkable for its failure to take account of the way in which artists most closely resembled miners and loggers, when they took up axes and guns in the pursuit of their art. If one wants clear examples of the painter or photographer treating the natural environment as a resource ripe for exploitation, it is the trigger-happy, axe-ready artist. If there is to be a villain, it should be the artist concerned only for what he took away, recorded in his sketchbooks or on his wet-plates, and not what he left behind on the ground.

This destructiveness does not matter if we are happy to separate a work of art from the circumstances of its production – to delight, like James Smith in 1857, in the ‘sylvan solitude’ of *Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges*, ‘the magnificent group of fern-trees with their curving feathery frondage’ and the ‘swelling amphitheatre beyond’⁵¹ – and to ignore what von Guerard may have done to secure this view. Nor perhaps is it all that troubling if, in considering the circumstances of production of these works, we recognise that what is precious now was so much more abundant in the nineteenth century; that what looks to us like destruction, then often seemed like improvement; and that the role of art itself was different when the artist was expected to better Nature.

This destructiveness matters a great deal, however, if we start from the premise that celebration of nature rests on appreciation and hence respect. The artists’s use of the axe and the gun ruptures this nexus. This rupture is disturbing enough when the work of art includes some sign of what has gone on. While we may not know who felled the trees in a work such as Joseph Bischoff’s panorama of the Grose Valley, at least there is tangible evidence of something awry. We have a chance of recognising the basis of the celebration offered. The breakdown between celebration and conservation is even more disturbing where the work itself gives no hint of what has gone on and only the written record may reveal how it was produced.

This problem is most acute in relation to a work such as von Guerard’s *Ferntree Gully* which seems to treat Nature as Cathedral – the fern gully as a

sacred place. Because this view of Nature is so close to that of contemporary environmentalism, it is easy to presume a complete identity of values. We should beware. The painting may not be what it seems. We need to accept the possibility that the colonial artist who, perhaps more than any other in Australia, seems to have valued Nature in all its detail, may have been happy to destroy it just to be able to present this view.

NOTES

¹ *Australian News for Home Readers*, 25 September 1865, p. 16; *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 12 June 1869, p. 133; 4 October 1869, p. 187; 31 December 1873, pp. 212-14, republished in *Illustrated Tasmanian News*, March 1874, pp. 12-13; *Victorian Naturalist*, vol. 24, 1907, p. 110. See, more generally, Peter Quartermaine, "'Speaking to the Eye": Painting, Photography and the Popular Illustrated Press in Australia, 1850-1900', in Anthony Bradley & Terry Smith (eds), *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, esp. pp. 64-68; Linden Gillbanks, 'Charles Walter: Collector of Images and Plants in East Gippsland', *Gippsland Heritage Journal*, no. 13, December 1992, pp. 3-10.

² *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 23 March 1868, p. 8; 31 December 1873, pp. 212-14.

³ *Illustrated Australian News*, 27 October 1866, p. 8; *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 23 March 1868, p. 8; 12 June 1869, p. 133.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1900, p. 12; 22 September 1902, p. 5.

⁵ Karen Current, *Photography and the Old West*, Abrams, New York, 1978, p. 30; Peter E. Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins: Photographer of the American West*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1983, pp. 19-21; Theodora Litsios, 'More than a Pretty Picture: Photography as a Tool in Wilderness Conservation', in Vance Martin & May Inglis (eds), *Wilderness: the Way Ahead*, Findhorn Press, Forres, 1984, p. 208.

⁶ 'Album of 20 albumen silver photographs of California by Carleton Watkins, 1861-1868', LTWEF 15, La Trobe Library; *Freeman's Journal*, 28 September 1872, p. 7; *Illustrated Australian News*, 7 August 1871, p. 128; 15 July 1873, pp. 122, 125; *Illustrated Sydney News*, 2 August 1873, p. 8; John Smith, *Wayfaring Notes (Second Series): A Holiday Tour Round the World*, Brown, Aberdeen, 1872, chaps 19, 20; Gael Newton, *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1988, pp. 184-5.

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 1875, p. 5.

⁸ *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 9 October 1875, p. 580; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 1875, p. 5; *Australasian Sketcher*, 15 April 1876, p. 10; *Railway Guide to New South Wales*, Richards, Sydney, p. 57. See, generally, Quartermaine, pp. 68-70; Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape Painting 1801-1890*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p. 100; Catherine Snowdon, 'The Take-Away Image: Photographing the Blue Mountains in the Nineteenth Century', in Peter Stanbury (ed.), *The Blue Mountains: Grand Adventure for All*, Macleay Museum/Second Back Row Press, Sydney, 1988, ch. 9.

⁹ Eccleston du Faur, Notebook, A1629, Mitchell Library, Sydney; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1875, p. 2; 7 October 1875, p. 3.

- ¹⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 November 1875, p. 5; *British Journal of Photography*, 1876, pp. 310, 317.
- ¹¹ Joseph Bischoff, Album of Photographs of the Grose Valley, LTAF 340, esp. ff. 32-33, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
- ¹² *British Journal of Photography*, 1876, p. 310.
- ¹³ Nicholas Caire, 'Scene from the Black Spur', in *Views of Victoria*, Anglo-Australasian Photographic Co., 1877, no. 27. See also Caire, 'Scene at the Foot of Mt Strzeletzki', *Gippsland Scenery*, no. 7.
- ¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 1875, p. 3; 11 November 1875, p. 5; *The Railway Guide of New South Wales*, p. 59.
- ¹⁵ David Robertson, *West of Eden: a History of the Art and Literature of Yosemite*. Yosemite Natural History Association/Wilderness Press, c. 1984, p. xviii.
- ¹⁶ *Alta California*, 7 April 1872, quoted in *Edward Muybridge: the Stanford Years 1872-1882*, Stanford University, Palo Alto, 1972, p. 45.
- ¹⁷ J.H. Harvey, 'A Photographic Trip to the Jenolan Caves and Kanangara Walls, N.S.W.', *Australian Photographic Journal*, June 1894, p. 14; January 1895, p. 147.
- ¹⁸ Harvey, p. 148.
- ¹⁹ Nanette Sexton, 'Watkins' Style and Technique in the Early Photographs', *California History*, vol. 57, fall 1978, pp. 246-7, 270.
- ²⁰ J.W. Beattie, 'The Picturesque West Coast of Tasmania', *Australian Photographic Journal*, 20 August 1897, p. 191; Margaret Tassell & David Wood, *Tasmanian Photographer: from the John Watt Beattie Collection*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 79, 86.
- ²¹ *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania for 1889*, p. ix; *The Giant Trees of Victoria*, Melbourne, 1890, plates 2, 4, 7, 8.
- ²² James Mullens, 'Landscape Photography', *Philadelphia Photographer*, vol. 10, no. 117, September 1873, p. 466; quoted by Palmquist, p. 59; A.H. Wall, *Artistic Landscape Photography*, Percy Lund, Bradford, 1896, p. 166.
- ²³ *Illustrated News for Home Readers*, 17 June 1871, p. 125.
- ²⁴ *Walch's Literary Intelligencer*, March 1863, p. 136.
- ²⁵ Ann-Marie Willis, *Picturing Australia: a History of Photography*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988, p. 34.
- ²⁶ See Clarence S. Jackson, *William H. Jackson: Picture Maker of the Old West*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1947, p. 57; James Alinder (ed.), *Carleton E. Watkins: Photographs of the Columbia River and Oregon*, Friends of Photography, 1979, plates 18, 20, 21. See also, Palmquist, p. 59.
- ²⁷ See Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1980, p. 160.
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- ³³ Marjorie Tipping (ed.), *An Artist on the Goldfields: the Diary of Eugene von Geurard*, Curry, O'Neil, Melbourne, 1982, pp. 40, 56, 58, 60, 63.
- ³⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October 1875, p. 2 (emphasis added).
- ³⁵ *Argus*, 15 December 1888, p. 13; Sandra Bardwell, 'National Parks in Victoria 1866-1954', Ph.D., Monash University, 1974, p. 337 (note 111).
- ³⁶ *Argus*, 16 June 1888, p. 5.
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- ⁴¹ Audubon, p. 181.
- ⁴² Audubon, p. 189.
- ⁴³ W.P. Adams, 'Deer Stalking with a Camera', *British Journal of Photography*, 1889, p. 647; L.G. Chandler, 'Nature Photography', *Australasian Photo-Review*, vol. 27, 1920, p. 62; David Elliston Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain: a Social History*, Allen Lane, London, 1976, pp. 232-4; David Knight, *Zoological Illustration: an Essay towards the History of Printed Zoological Pictures*, Dawson, Folkestone, Kent, 1977, p. 67.
- ⁴⁴ *Emu*, vol. 15, 1915-16, pp. 47, 160; Charles Barrett (ed.), *Australian Nature Pictures*, Alexander McCubbin, Melbourne, 1920.
- ⁴⁵ Willis, p. 60.
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- ⁴⁸ Nancy K. Anderson, "'The Kiss of Enterprise": the Western Landscape as Symbol and Resource', in William Truettner (ed.), *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1991, p. 242.
- ⁴⁹ Anderson, esp. pp. 241-3.
- ⁵⁰ Paul Fox with Jennifer Phipps, *Sweet Damper and Gossip: Colonial Sightings from the Goulburn and North-East*, Benalla Art Gallery, Benalla, 1994, pp. 7, 11. See also, Simon Ryan, 'Exploring Aesthetics: the Picturesque Appropriation of Land in Journals of Australian Exploration', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, October 1992, pp. 282-93.
- ⁵¹ *Argus*, 4 December 1857, p. 5.

