William Strutt and the search for an Australian National Identity

Theorist Richard White believes, “Many have sought to hunt out the ‘real’ Australia or the ‘typical’ Australian and, with their eyes fixed firmly on what is distinctive about the land and its people, have ended their search among the convicts, bushrangers, the shearers, the gum trees and wide open spaces.”¹ This is especially evident within ‘Australian’ Colonial art. Indeed from the 1880’s conscious attempts were made by artists to forge a distinct national culture.² Among these artists was William Strutt, an English born, European-trained artist who resided in Victoria for eleven years.³ His 1911 work, ‘The Burial of Burke’ exposes how a sense of settler nationalism was forged through the genre of history painting. Within this nationalism the concept of the ‘Australian’ hero is implicit. The drama of the frontier lifestyle exposes the romantic notion of man versus nature. The harshness of the Australian landscape being the primary cause of mortality helped to forge the concept of Australia as an unforgiving and harsh country which “taxed human endurance to the limit”.⁴ Whilst Strutt’s work contributes to forging such notions of nationalism it can only be read in light of the European tropes exploited and the particular vision of Australia which is conveyed as a result. Namely, one which excluded the presence of indigenous peoples and women. To a large extent Strutt’s work raises the broader questions regarding what constitutes ‘Australian’ art and whether the popular view of Australia was truth or simply myth.

The forging of a sense of ‘Australian’ nationalism is a clear theme present throughout most Colonial works and ‘The Burial of Burke is no exception. History painting in a European sense was long regarded as the highest form of art, but upon settlement in Australia, artists struggled to find subjects worthy of commemoration.⁵ The Burke and Wills expedition of 1860 to 1861 to the Gulf of Carpentaria in what became known as the ‘The Great Exploring Expedition’ and the death of the explorers as a result, provided artists with the impetus to produce artwork which represented the triumphs and grievances of the new colony.⁶ Roslyn Haynes describes how Burke and Wills provided “the first incident of nationhood” which demanded commemoration.⁷ Strutt’s painting represents Burke’s burial at Cooper’s Creek with historical accuracy. He apparently enquired how they buried him and then reconstructed the scene to produce the final oil painting.⁸

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⁵ Tim Bonyhady, Burke and Wills: From Melbourne to Myth, David Ell Press, Balmain N.S.W, 1991. (p.79.)
⁶ Majorie Tipping, in William Strutt, Victoria the Golden: scenes, sketches and jottings from nature, Library Committee: Melbourne, 1980. (p.17.)
Strutt’s emphasis on realism attests that the function of the painting was to record as accurately as possible the scene and, in doing so, pay respect to the deceased, and, so to, immortalise Burke and those involved. The image of nationhood presented is highlighted by the teamwork of the men lowering Burke’s body into the earth, each clenching an edge of the flag and bowing their heads in respect. The man to the right with his hat off stands in tribute to the explorer. The atmosphere of stillness created by the static appearance of the figures and the warm tones of the grass and hills invites the early 20th century viewer to contemplate, remember, respect and to see the death of the great explorer as significant to their own national identity.

The representation of Burke as a hero is evidence of nationalism. Once the death of Burke and Wills had reached Melbourne there was a public outburst of grief. The Argus printed an Editorial which proclaimed Burke as ‘Victoria’s first hero’. In appropriate fashion, Strutt portrays Burke shrouded in the British flag, highlighting that, at the time, Australian identity was largely grounded in British heritage. The vivid intensity of the red, white and blue colours of the flag in comparison to the neutral colours of the background, reinforced the flag and hence Burke’s body as the focal point of the composition. Painted in 1911, after Federation, Strutt could have replaced the Union Jack with the new Australian flag, but it seems he made a conscious decision to keep the Union Jack. This decision constitutes a tribute to Empire and the practices of British colonialism rather than ‘Australia’ itself. The very act of covering a body with a flag is highly honorary almost resembling a degree of martyrdom or dying for the cause of the nation. This nation is Britain. The fact Strutt’s initial watercolour for the final oil painting was sold for the purpose of illustrating a book titled ‘The Heroes of Britain’ attests to this fact. The revival of the Burke and Wills subject matter by later artists such as Sidney Nolan is evident through his artwork of the same title of 1985. Nolan appropriates the British flag as the background for his composition and plasters a skeletal-like figure of Burke onto the centre of the Union Jack. Nolan makes the statement more implicit; Burke is visibly bound to the British Empire. In such a way Britain is implicated in his death. On the other hand, Nolan could be disowning the hero as ‘Australian’ in a mocking manner, criticising the explorers’ ‘stupidity’ through earlier art (like that of Strutt’s). The latter is more likely. It is clear that notions of nationalism conveyed were extrapolated from British concepts of the hero.

The drama of Colonial frontier life and particularly the harshness of the landscape portrays Australia as an unforgiving country and the cause of mortality. As Smith describes, Australia was portrayed in art as “a hard country—a land that could dry out the body and spirit of a man, and no place for women”. Strutt enforces the stereotype of the Australian land as one of hardship and privation. The dryness of the landscape is evoked through the golden brown shades of the land and the sparcity of green foliage and lack of native animals. The almost white expanse of the sky attests to this dry atmosphere. In such a way the land is portrayed as crucial to the discourse of mortality and the theme of man versus nature; where nature conquers. The uninhabitable environment reinforces the theme of death, and a tree to the left hangs over Burke’s body. Whilst the tree acts

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a device for framing the composition, it also functions as a symbol of nature’s ultimate victory. The body will eventually decompose, providing nutrients for the tree to grow. Accordingly, the tree is labelled with a plaque, becoming Burke’s tree. Ultimately the defeat of heroes through death was not seen as inglorious for they were victims of the malignant enemy, nature.\textsuperscript{12} Other works by Strutt show this also such as when he displays ‘dingo devouring Wills remains’ and the isolation of Burke’s final moment of death.\textsuperscript{13} In ‘the Burial of Burke’ the viewer assumes the gaze of the man to the right and is invoked to sympathise with the man who became nature’s casualty. Not all could survive so those who remain epitomise the Australian man as ‘tough’ and enduring. Australia did bad things to explorers, and bad things to artists. Curnow describes, “The clumsy brushwork, the garish colours of the faces and clothes, the lack of finish and of fine atmospheric gradations which are evident in Strutt’s other paintings suggests a crude overpainting by an ammeturer retorter”.\textsuperscript{14} Heather Curnow’s disgust for what appears to be an unfinished painting may well be a stylistic device for portraying the ruggedness of the Australian environment and its people. Emphasis on death functioned as a tool for conveying the harshness of the Australian landscape and the origins of national identity in survival.

The European notion of the ‘good death’ is particularly faint in Australian colonial art.\textsuperscript{15} This concept is a construction which reflects the concerns of the European middle class which embraced the notion of self determination and control, even in death.\textsuperscript{16} Strutt records Burke’s burial in the bush, implying the essential aloneness of the Australian experience of death. There is no grand funeral, the gravestone is a plaque on a tree, there is no cemetery and no church. The absence of religiously related themes represents a profound difference to European images of death.\textsuperscript{17} The book on the ground to the right of the painting may be a missal or Bible, it is not clear. Regardless, the fact that it is on the ground, highlights its insignificance. The finality of death is clear and there is no suggestion of a transcendent encounter.\textsuperscript{18} The funeral occurs in isolation, although it is not a ‘private’ ritual, given that the location is open to all the elements. It has this effect because there are only five mourners. In contrast to the European notion of self determination and control in death, there is a stoic acceptance of death by the men; death is not denied.\textsuperscript{19} As Burke was killed by nature, so he returns to it. In a manly fashion the men show their respect by refraining from physically expressing their emotions. Rejection of idea of the ‘good death’ is linked historically to Australia being a refuge for convicts, outcasts, diggers and explorers and the reality that the settlers of the late 1800’s were generally not part of the middleclass. Other explanations favour the concept of Australia as a land where peoples lost all religious inhibitions. The concentration of the theme of death is interesting considering the aim of Colonial art to promote emigration and settlement seemingly encouraging only those who were brave enough to risk their life and possibly death. Contradictions within Australian art are shown to be paramount.

\textsuperscript{13} Lesley Fitzpatrick, ‘Savage and Solitary: Death in Australian Painting’ in Kathy Charmaz, Allan Kellehear, Glennis Howarth (eds) \textit{The unknown country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA}, Macmillain, Great Britain, 1997, (p.21.)
\textsuperscript{14} Heather Curnow, \textit{The Life and Art of William Strutt}, Alister Taylor: Martinborough N.Z, 1980. (p.34.)
\textsuperscript{15} Lesley Fitzpatrick, ‘Savage and Solitary: Death in Australian Painting’ in Kathy Charmaz, Allan Kellehear, Glennis Howarth (eds) \textit{The unknown country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA}, Macmillain, Great Britain, 1997, (p.25.)
\textsuperscript{16} Lesley Fitzpatrick, (p.25.)
\textsuperscript{17} Lesley Fitzpatrick, “(p.24.)
\textsuperscript{18} Lesley Fitzpatrick, ‘(p.24.)
\textsuperscript{19} Lesley Fitzpatrick, (p.26.)
The image of Australia forged by Colonial artists became trapped in European intellectual milieu. In some respects Australian works became pastiches of European tropes. The presence of horses in the background and absence of native animals within the landscape is entirely foreign. The clothing of the men complete with vest and tie seems ill suited to the Australian climate and highly European. At the same time the artist must be credited with his depiction of the ‘Australian tree’ and the depiction of individual leaves rather than clumps of foliage and dry green shades which compose it. Strutt’s had success in his depiction of the ‘Australian sun.’ It is represented by the warm palette of golden browns and the whiteness of the sky which evokes an atmosphere of heat and dryness, both of which are characteristically associated with Australia. It seems that the clear elements of British culture and identity have become intertwined with the artist’s desire for realism and the need to portray the sparcity of the landscape with accuracy. Strutt’s painting portrays only one aspect of Australia at the time, since neither Aboriginal people or women were included in the dominant view of national identity.

William Strutt’s ‘The Burial of Burke’ demonstrates that during the Colonial period the search for an Australian identity stopped at typical imagery and common subject matter, which became the foundation of Australian myth. Artists saw the need to forge a Colonial history for Australia through art and the death of the ‘great explorers’ Burke and Wills provided this opportunity. As ‘The Burial of Burke’ displays, works were crucial in the development of a sense of Australian nationalism. It seems however, that this sense of nationalism derived much of its earliest influence from British culture and their concept of the ‘hero’. At the same time, Strutt’s work was innovative of the Colonial period, given he begins to move away, though not entirely, from European conventions of the ‘picturesque’, with the portrayal of the harshness of the landscape and the link between the land and mortality. The focus and treatment of mortality in Strutt’s work largely differs from that of Europe and the middle class concept of the ‘good death’, and new styles and techniques had to be adopted to portray the ‘Australian sun’ and the gum tree with realism. His work can be therefore seen as a pastiche of European influences and the need to express the different quality of the Australian landscape and its people. Significantly, the vision of Australia presented by Strutt’s work and most ‘Australian’ Colonial art for that matter, is a narrow vision of Australia, conveying a representation of a society in which indigenous, and, to a lesser extent, women, were absent. Whist Strutt displayed distinctive qualities of his new environment, he was not entirely free from his European background and influence in creating Australian art.

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Bibliography:


Lesley Fitzpatrick, ‘Savage and Solitary: Death in Australian Painting’ in Kathy Charmaz, Allan Kellehear, Glennys Howarth (eds) *The unknown country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA*, Macmillain, Great Britain, 1997


Image 1: William Strutt ‘The Burial of Burke’ 1911 (Oil)

William Strutt, ‘The Burial of Burke’ 1911 *with frame
William Strutt, ‘Dingo Devouring Wills Remains’ undated
(Pen and Ink)

Sidney Nolan, ‘The Burial of Burke’ 1985
central panel of triptych
oil on canvas