

Legibility and Little Bourke Street in *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia*

TONY HUGHES-D'AETH, UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The logic of the picturesque

Cassell's Picturesque Australasia was published in four volumes over two years between 1887 and 1889. It is no coincidence that the publication period spans the centenary year of 1888. The centenary of settlement at Sydney Cove was an important proto-nationalist moment, and the associated celebrations and public events provided an ideal environment for the release of celebratory publications about the Australasian colonies. The history of picturesque publications is both long and complex but in the late nineteenth-century the picturesque functioned as a multi-media (word and image) format for the celebration of place. *Picturesque Australasia* was part of a series of picturesque works produced by the Cassell & Company publishing house about Europe, Canada, America and the Mediterranean (Nowell-Smith 101). This paper addresses the representation of urban identities in Melbourne in *Picturesque Australasia*. In doing so, it seeks to highlight several dynamic relationships in the text: between the logic of the picturesque and the colonial city; between forms of identity, both topographical and performative; between signification through words and signification through pictures; between the public and the private; and more generally, between the Chinatown of Little Bourke Street and the orderly avenues of what *Picturesque Australasia* calls 'Melbourne Proper'.

I want to begin by suggesting that picturesque publications are underpinned by three somewhat contradictory imperatives, which collectively constitute a form of logic.

1. *The expanding kingdom of the visible*

Picturesque publications display a certain will to knowledge which insists that dark regions must be illuminated. A frequent image, for instance, in Australian picturesque works is the forest gully, an image of dense vegetation and intimidating organic profusion. The message appears to be that no corner of Australia is too remote that it may not be accessed by picturesque vision. Caves are also frequently depicted. There seems, in picturesque publications, to be a very low tolerance for the opaque.

2. *The Christmas stocking principle*

Picturesque publications seek to reveal a place that is of infinite variety and interest. Picturesque Australia is therefore cornucopic Australia, an Australia that is superabundant in all the features that make a place special. Picturesque Australia overflows with history, with natural beauty, with industrial progress, with urban expansion and civic development. This imperative towards being diverse and interesting was made more pressing in the Australian colonies by a perceived monotony both in the landscape and in urban centres.

3. *The imperative of ultimate legibility*

Because what is immediately visible is not always immediately interesting, these first two picturesque imperatives seem at various moments to bump into one another. The imperative of ultimate legibility mediates between the imperatives of interest and visibility. Legibility provides a position somewhere short of complete transparency, but safely within the boundaries of the comprehensible. Thus, while at first blush certain aspects of picturesque Australia may appear curious, or even mysterious, all of picturesque Australia is ultimately legible, able to be read and understood.

The Australian city

The Australian city in the late nineteenth century presented picturesque logic with some interesting problems. The foremost problem was that cities in Australia were perceived as being somewhat uninteresting, or as Francis Adams remarked, 'a mere replica at second hand of the older civilization.' (*The Australians*, 28) Moreover, while Sydney was perceived as having some modicum of individuality, Melbourne was found to be depressingly dull. 'Imagine a huge chessboard flung on to the earth,' says Adams, 'and you have what is the true and characteristic Melbourne' (24). Similar sentiments were voiced by E.E. Morris, general editor of *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* and author of its Melbourne chapters:

Most people feel that in the laying out of Melbourne that symbol of rectitude, the straight line, has been too much revered. Admirable as in many ways is the straight line, convenient as it may be to travel along the shortest distance between two points, yet this line is not nature's favourite; and art should follow nature. (1:59)

So there was a real sense that in violating the imperative of interest and diversity, Melbourne, as an urban site, failed according to picturesque logic. *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* appears to compensate for Melbourne's picturesque failings in a variety of ways. One response was to celebrate the monotony of Melbourne's urban plan as one of the defining features of the city. 'It must be remembered,' proclaims Morris, 'that no city in the world has a more regular ground plan' (59). A second strategy was to emphasise the newness of Melbourne. This was part of a more general pattern in the rhetoric of the centenary of celebrating the newness, and in particular, the rapid progress of the Australasian colonies. Melbourne was felt to epitomise this newness, this dizzying, almost unreal acceleration from savagery into civilization.

The book's third response, and perhaps the most interesting one, was to discover within Melbourne a zone which lay outside of the surveyor's reach, a realm which was as chaotic as the rest of Melbourne was orderly:

One other street in Melbourne has a very special character—Little Bourke Street, the Chinese quarter. There are a great many Chinese in Australia, and some few have risen to the position of wealthy merchants. As a rule which knows few exceptions, they are very industrious, and render good service to housekeepers as hawkers of fish and vegetables. In mining places they can make a living where no Englishman can. But they are not good colonists, because they come to Australia with the intention of saving as much money as they can scrape together, and then returning to China. Moreover, they bring no women with them, and by providing temptations to gambling, and in other ways, are the cause of not a little immorality. Our artists, under the protection of two policemen, ventured into the Chinese haunts in Little Bourke Street, and have reproduced some features of the

strange life which is daily going on there within a few hundred yards of the Chambers of Legislature. But this subject is so strange and special that we have devoted to it a separate chapter. (55)

This compensatory response, the 'discovery' of Little Bourke Street, points to ways in which picturesque imperatives resonate with the racial imperatives of a colonial culture. There is, for instance, a concern in this passage with boundaries and separation that is reminiscent of Mary Louise Pratt's account of colonial exploration narratives. In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt makes the point that details concerning the indigenous inhabitants were generally separated from the main body of an explorer's journal and placed into separate 'customs and manners' appendices, a practice Pratt calls, 'textual apartheid'. *Picturesque Australasia* likewise racially segregates its chapters. In doing so, Little Bourke Street becomes a kind of rhetorical homeland for Melbourne's Chinese community. Moreover, there is a further division *within* the Chinese subject, a polarisation of the Chinese person into two distinct types. On the one hand, the hard-working, industrious Chinese citizen, and on the other, an idea of the Chinese subject as being constituted by moral transgression. The 'discovery' of Little Bourke Street can properly be viewed as an extension of picturesque logic, an attempt to bring Melbourne's Chinese quarter within the expanding kingdom of the visible. The presence of the police signals a pointedly coercive dimension in the manner in which the picturesque is deployed against the Chinese population of Melbourne.

Little Bourke Street and models of identity

The Little Bourke Street chapter in *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* is not written by E.E. Morris, who writes the bulk of the Melbourne chapters, but by the Scottish artist and journalist, Hume Nisbet. The choice of journalist is revealing because of all the contributors to the work, Nisbet was the most self-consciously 'artistic'. His contributions are typified by colourful 'word sketches' and purple Ruskinian effusions. Nisbet's inclusion directly following the more prosaic Morris is consonant with the manner in which Little Bourke Street is used to spice up the orderly avenues of 'Melbourne Proper':

Little Bourke Street is a world apart from the city of Melbourne, and the race which occupies its crowded courts seems to have no connection with the other people who by day or night promenade along the pavements of Bourke Street proper. Few Victorians who look with just pride upon the vast, clean-kept streets and lofty buildings of their monster city know or dream of the life so far removed from all their ideals of home comfort which is seething quietly a few feet from where they are walking and laughing in happy ignorance. Let me begin by lifting a single corner of the veil which nicely covers up all, and show a scene or two from the Chinese quarter. (1: 75)

Nisbet's opening paragraph is a familiar example of what can be called, after Disraeli's famous description of rich and poor in Victorian London, a 'Two Nations' trope. Little Bourke Street is both immediately proximate and a 'world apart' from the pleasant commercial and civic spaces of 'proper' Melbourne. The disjunction between the public city and the slum has, in the work of recent historians, been viewed as corresponding to the topography of the bourgeois subject. In other words, the border between the slum and the public city mirrored the axis of the bourgeois self and its Other(s). This topographical model of identity situates the slum as the externalised

expression of *that which is not you*. In British texts (the novels of Dickens being paradigmatic) this process of othering is essentially class-based. However, Robert Dixon has argued in 'The Colonial City: Crime Fiction and Empire' (155-178), that in representations of the colonial city otherness turned on a dual axis of both class and race.

If a topography of the self is implied by the labelling of Little Bourke Street as a 'world apart', a second dimension of selfhood is signalled by Nisbet's use of the word 'scene'. The word draws attention to the role of performance within nineteenth-century representations of the slum. The idea of performativity has been productively developed by Alan Mayne in *Representing the Slum*, which analyses the newspaper coverage of slums in Sydney in the late nineteenth century. He speaks, for instance, about what he termed 'threshold performances,' short textual dramas through which the reader enacted the entry into the world of the slum. 'By participating in these threshold performances,' suggests Mayne, 'readers clambered Alice-like through the key hole and into the topsy-turvy world of the other half' (88). Mayne's refinement is useful because it combines two models of identity, one based around topography and one based around performance. This dual model seems to be at work in *Picturesque Australasia's* account of Little Bourke Street, which carries its own threshold performance:

Shifting a loose paling aside, our guide crushed through; we followed, and lo, another land lay revealed. It was no longer Little Bourke Street, but a vast territory of horrible dens of infamy. What we saw was vile enough, but yet innocence itself to what we could not see, as our visit had been notified, and the inmates were mostly out, or if in, pretending to be out. Most of these dens had Chinese characters upon the lintels; and as we went on we passed shambling, indistinct figures, who kept to the shadow side of the wall, and tried to move past unseen (1: 79)

This passage is interesting not only for the way it encapsulates both the performative and the topographical dimensions of identity, but also because of the way it appears to hinge on issues of visibility and legibility, and more particularly, on the idea of resistance. The Chinese characters resist reading in the same way that the Chinese people resist being seen.

Public transparency in pictures and words

The resistance which Little Bourke Street provides to the middle-class observer/narrator is important because it serves to emphasise and amplify the supposed transparency of what the *Picturesque Australasia* calls 'Melbourne Proper'. Melbourne Proper is, in fact, public Melbourne. Public Melbourne is transparent and represented as such. Its institutions are self-explanatory and its rituals pleasant and uncontroversial. In public Melbourne, people go to the cricket and the horse-racing, they row on the Yarra, they wander through the botanical gardens, and the pictures in *Cassell's Picturesque Australasia* codify this public transparency. In an illustration, for instance, of the Melbourne Public Library, an image of the exterior of the building is overlaid with images of its interior. Inside the public building is not the private, but more publicness, public rituals of reading newspapers and books and viewing paintings. Nor does the text contradict the images, its domain remains strictly public. In other words, there is an agreed discretion in both text and image.

In the account of Little Bourke Street, the demarcation between public and private breaks down, but significantly the collapse is only partial. The illustrations are on the

whole discrete publicly oriented images of the everyday life of Chinese people. The text, however, enters a gloomy netherworld that Mayne calls 'slumland'. The differential nature of this representation appears to correspond to the two kinds of Chinese subject previously identified. While the images depict the industrious Chinese citizen, the text is concerned with revealing the dangerous and shocking immorality of the Chinese person:

... we saw a hideous, yellow-visaged, shrunken-eyed Chinaman, and a young woman about twenty, neatly dressed and comely, while between them stood a tiny oil-lamp, the light of which had shown us the way in, and near the lamp a little saucer with a dark, treacly substance at the bottom. She held the long opium-pipe to her lips, and waited; he slowly extracted a small quantity of the glutinous liquor from the saucer on the point of a needle, and, rolling it round like a pea, held it over the lamp-flame. He rolled it round and round until it frizzled, swelled, and then became reduced in size, so as to fit into the tiny aperture of the pipe which the woman held glued to her lips. As he pushed it in, and held the filled pipe over the flame, the girl inhaled one long, sucking breath, which she swallowed and then it was all over—to begin again after we left, pipe after pipe—one long suck to each elaborately-prepared pipe. (1: 79)

In this account, opium is used as a euphemism for racial disintegration and moral collapse. As a trope, the seduction of white women by Chinese men through opium was virtually a colonial cliché, one explored in detail in Alison Broinowski's *The Yellow Lady*. What is striking about this account is its almost hypersexual drama, and its orally fixated pornography. The drug ritual is blatantly sexualised as a way of simultaneously luxuriating in and decrying the collapse of social boundaries. So while the picturesque text carefully assembles boundaries it participates in a parallel process which sees them deliciously dissolved. In other words, there is a kind of economy of pleasure which is based around the very contingency of the divisions within the picturesque text.

By way of conclusion, it is interesting to consider why there is such a marked dissonance between text and image in *Picturesque Australasia's* account of Little Bourke Street. Partly it might be attributed to a certain colonial aversion to slum pictures. Alan Mayne, for instance, notes that, 'intriguingly, the medium of illustration was itself eschewed by the press in Sydney' (86). This disagreement between the quaintness of the illustrations and the heavy-breathing of the text suggests that there were distinct differences in the normative codes governing images as opposed to those governing words. Put another way, it seems an Australian readership was scandalised by images in a way that they simply weren't by words.

More fundamentally, the discrepancy between word and image relates to a somewhat convoluted ideology of separate spheres. Publicness, it was seen, was retained not just in the chapters on 'Melbourne Proper', but also in the illustrations of Little Bourke Street. It is only in the text that the distinction between public and private collapses completely. In the text, rather than a division between public and private, Little Bourke Street offers a division between the overt and the covert. Chinese Australians had, according to *Picturesque Australasia*, no private lives, only secret lives. Chinatown in Melbourne is thus marked linguistically by the use of a different rhetoric to that employed in the description of Melbourne Proper. Unlike public Melbourne, Little Bourke Street does not speak for itself, it must be interrogated. The result is not a transparent Chinatown, a state of affairs that is the preserve of Melbourne Proper, but

a legible Little Bourke Street whose practices can in the right conditions be deciphered. Melbourne's Chinese are overdetermined, coded initially as obscure (that is, not transparent, not visible), and then forcibly decoded as corrupt.

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