

NARRATIVES OF EMERGENCE: LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY IN LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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FOR Hegel, the New Worlds of America and Australia are conceived as 'not only relatively new, but intrinsically so in respect of their entire physical and psychical constitution. Their geological antiquity we have nothing to do with' (Hegel 81). That is, they are an 'other'. If a condition of *terra nullius* was attributed to Australia, then Hegel's 'psychical constitution' can be taken as reference to the land (as opposed to its peoples), whereby the land possesses a 'spirit'. By extension, the coloniser/colonised binarism situates the colonised landscape within a dialogue with colonial discourse, and in so doing a contestation of power arises between the two over the possibility of representing and understanding the landscape within colonial discourse. Nineteenth-century British theorists of geological strata formation went to great personal and political pains to prove that the geology of the New Worlds was the same as that found within the shores of the centre.¹ In this way the boundaries of empire seen on the map could be proven by scientific theory to correspond with the boundaries of geological rock types. That is, the boundaries of Empire corresponded to the boundaries of Nature. Landscape painters and writers of exploration journals utilised the conventions of the picturesque as a method of understanding the landscape. In doing so, allusion to notions of antiquity provided the coloniser with a sense of tradition, familiarity, and belonging. These two realms of colonial discursive production present a conflict with Hegel's comprehension of the New World in terms of the same/other dialectic.

In nineteenth-century Western Australia, the image confronting the colonial explorer was that of a landscape which had little resemblance to the nostalgically idealised rural landscape, and none at all to that of urban industrial England. For this foreign landscape to be inscribed as belonging to the coloniser, it had to be represented within codes that made it recognisable. Following the written 'imagining' of a landscape that could accommodate the project of colonial industrialisation, photography was increasingly recognised from the 1880s to 1900 (and beyond) as one useful tool of confirmation for the coloniser. The photographic image, I will argue, represented the colonial presence within a New World landscape riven with significant local inflections. Photography – as a polysemic subject circulating without its own language – was conducive to colonialist self-definition within discourse, beginning with geographic exploration in the 1880s.

The process of self-definition can be usefully understood by employing Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity'. In short, Bhabha proposes that the colonised is not a passive receptor of the discursive whims of the colonial power, but subverts and alters colonial discourse by its character of 'difference' which arises out of the process of communication or interaction. Bhabha sees the displacement (or 'repetition') of colonial discourses onto a colonised culture (which includes, I would argue, the colonised landscape) as an act that cannot produce a perfect simulation of the original (Bhabha 149–50). Instead, what he terms 'hybridity' occurs: '[as] the sign of the productivity of colonial power . . . the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite

of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory' (154). It is from the inclusion of the colonised (the object/subject that is different) into the coloniser's forms of representation that Bhabha's condition of 'hybridisation' arises. Photographic images, as 'site[s] of desire', needed to be embedded in colonial discourse in order to be apprehended by colonial audiences and institutions. As knowledge of the contents of the colony is accumulated, originating with information gained from explorations, the discourses of the coloniser expand and a space is opened for the 'other' that defies easy categorisation.

The earliest published account of Western Australian explorers using photography appeared as a parliamentary report in 1883. John Forrest, who had attained the position of Commissioner of Crown Lands and Surveyor General, had conducted the 'last' of the great Australian explorations nearly ten years earlier (Forrest 250). Journeys into the landscape from that time on were supposedly expeditions in aid of consolidating the colonial presence in land already 'known' (or at least mapped).

Noting a split within geographical organisations such as the English based Royal Geographical Society, Paul Carter divides the activity of geographical exploration into two seemingly distinct schools. These are 'scientific geography' and 'travel'-cum-'exploration' geography (Carter 49-50). Carter does not acknowledge explorations that were classified within government reports or specialist journals as 'expeditions', 'journeys', and 'visits'. In doing so, his statement that 'in the first fifty years of photography, *not a single expedition was photographed*', (48, italics in original) is only meaningful within a very circumscribed definition of the term 'exploration'.

The report included the diary from Forrest's 'visit' to the Kimberley region. As a written account, a 'visit' is hard to differentiate stylistically and structurally from exploration. Compass bearings, trigonometric surveys, speculation on the utilisation of land (in relation to the picturesque qualities of the landscape), and the presence of the return route all feature in Forrest's diary, making it classifiable as an 'exploration'. These features place Carter's definition of the 'identity' of exploration, and the relationship exploration has with photography, in some doubt.

The following extract is from Forrest's report on the 'route traversed' from the Fitzroy River to Port Osborne.

The valleys all through these quartzite ranges were very picturesque, and in each a nice stream of fresh delicious water was running at this season of the year, while palms and cajuputs lined their verdant banks. The valleys were, however, often very contracted, and those near Port Osborne almost unapproachable and inaccessible. The grass was so luxuriant and good that one can scarcely imagine a better place for stock, and especially I think for cattle and horses.

(WALCVGP 5).

The picturesque setting described above by Forrest is illustrative of a narrative convention repeatedly seen in expedition reports whereby the identification of a picturesque scene necessarily precedes the 'imagination' of how the landscape could be utilised. In this case a pastoral future is envisaged, and with this, a settlement. The discourse of the picturesque, in this instance, is modified by regional nuances special to Forrest's new world. The 'unapproachable and inaccessible' valleys can be seen as acceptable additions, leaving a 'wild' reserve that provides a suitable backdrop to future cultivation. More significantly, however, is the inscription of a landscape which, to invert an earlier neologism of Bhabha's, is almost *other*, but not quite (Bhabha 1984, 126). The authority of colonial discourse becomes ambivalent as the landscape 'almost' (but not

quite) denies access to the coloniser. Within the practice of land survey and exploration there is the suggestion of a discursive desire emphasising identification with, rather than differentiation from, the other.

Forrest's report of the expedition is followed by his diary account – a literary form conventionally allowing for shorthand reflection of the everyday. As a result, a 'readerly' convention of unmediated, first-hand responses links text to site, similar to the 'transparency' attributed to landscape and social-documentary photography. Forrest comments on his diary as

being merely the notes of my journey from day to day, written up at night by the camp fire, which may prove of interest to settlers and others who may hereafter visit the same localities, and may also be useful to those who intend settling or travelling over the country.

(WALCV&P 3-4).

Whether these 'mere' notes were 'written up at night by the camp fire' to appear in the form of a government report is highly contentious. Journal reports could be written up 'months after the time' (275), as Forrest recalls in his 1874 exploration, and were most often rewritten for specific audiences be they government officials or the editors and readers of specialist journals. Forrest's diary forms the basis of a report that holds its value, according to Governor F. Napier Broome, in swaying the Legislative Council to amend the Kimberley Land Regulations which 'in their present shape were hampering the settlement of the district' (WALCV&P 3). The Kimberley was zoned 'a new and almost unknown country' with double rent, uncertain leases, and a stocking clause (6); factors blocking potential government revenue from land sales and pastoral leases. Broome qualifies the details of the report by stating that it 'possesses in a high degree the valuable qualities which an experienced traveller and observer like Mr. Forrest can give to the record of a journey through an imperfectly known country' (3). As a 'traveller and observer' Forrest is positioned with a degree of detachment from the landscape, corresponding to the Reverend William Gilpin's (1724–1804) theory of the picturesque as a process of observation and recording.² In this way, Forrest's deployment of the picturesque takes on an impartiality that is representative of an exploration discourse informed by the scientific demands for accuracy within empirical methodology. The form of literature in the report combines the concerns of science and popular travel narrative, providing empirical evidence for the utilitarian response to the landscape instigated by political, economic, and aesthetic discourses.

In his discussion of the representation of Egypt in colonial exhibitions, Timothy Mitchell sees that the 'problem for the photographer or writer visiting the Middle East was not only to make an accurate picture of the East, but to set up the East as a picture. One can copy or represent only what appears already to exist representationally – as a picture' (Mitchell 229). Similarly in late nineteenth-century accounts of the landscape by Western Australian explorers, the features of the landscape that stand out for comment, or on occasion are photographed, are those which are recognisably picturesque and hold a utilitarian potential.

May 13th, Sunday. — Continued on our return journey . . . On several occasions went on to hills and got bearings and other information to further complete a sketch of our route and the country . . .

May 14th. — Retraced our steps nearly along our outward route to our camp of May 7th, Southeast of the 'Round Hill', at the Palm Spring. On my way, added to the

feature survey as much as possible, and followed down the tidal outlet of the Robinson and Keightley Rivers for two or three miles. The scenery to-day was most beautiful. Some of the horses are done up, and it was with difficulty that one of them was got into camp. Took a photograph of our mid-day camp in the sandy bed of the Robinson River

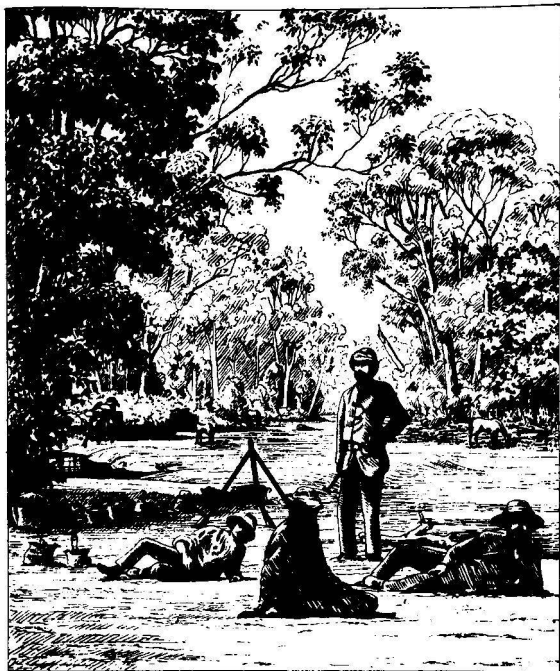
(WALCV 6 P 14).

This extract from Forrest's diary characterises the hierarchy of tasks performed. Upon the return journey, additional geographical survey work is followed by a comment on the scenery and then, as an appendage, Forrest mentions taking a photograph of the expedition party's camp. Reproduced as an etching by Calcutta-born member of the social-elite, Henry Charles Prinsep, this photograph entitled 'Mid-day Camp in Sandy Bed of Robinson River' [fig. 1] (14) conforms to the picturesque juxtaposition of the 'wild' and 'civilised'. In addition to the title, the illustration is captioned with the region name, district name, and the date. This form of titling has since become a convention within documentary photography and serves to mark this instance as a specific event in time.

A linear progression from 'wilderness' to stable settlement is made via the itinerary of travel. Five days after Forrest made a photograph of his transient survey camp he photographs the 'Camp of the "Meda River Company", on the May River' [fig. 2] (14). The diary entry assigns this action with even less importance. Following a brief overview of the conditions of the Meda River Company's sheep and suggestions for future transport of livestock, Forrest ends his diary entry for the day with the sentence: 'Took a photograph of this camp'. Unlike the first illustration, this etching of a photograph does not include the date in the title. Whereas the date in the first picture marked the presence of metropolitan colonial officials at a transient camp, the absence of date in the second picture suggests that the people photographed at this 'Company Camp' will remain for an unspecified period of time. They are permanent fixtures in the landscape. The translation from a photograph to an etching gives the opportunity for a picturesque refinement of an image that may not have originally been adorned with qualities associated with notions of antiquity. The etching can be construed as a 'truth' document by its association with photography.

This illustration, also reproduced as an etching by Prinsep, appears immediately after the previous one in the diary section of the report. Our eye is led from a foreground composed with logs and an empty dray, to the midground which shows a group of nine men casually standing with arms folded, wearing wide-brimmed hats and loose fitting work clothes. They stand in front of a shelter constructed from bush timber and in the background are grazing sheep rimmed by trees. Rather than standing out from the landscape, as in the earlier illustration, these men are positioned as a collective within it. They belong to the class of 'pioneers', a type that Forrest describes in the report preceding his diary as those 'energetic men of small capital willing to risk their all and undergo privations in the hope of securing a competency in the future. . . and those who bear the burden and heat of the day' (6).

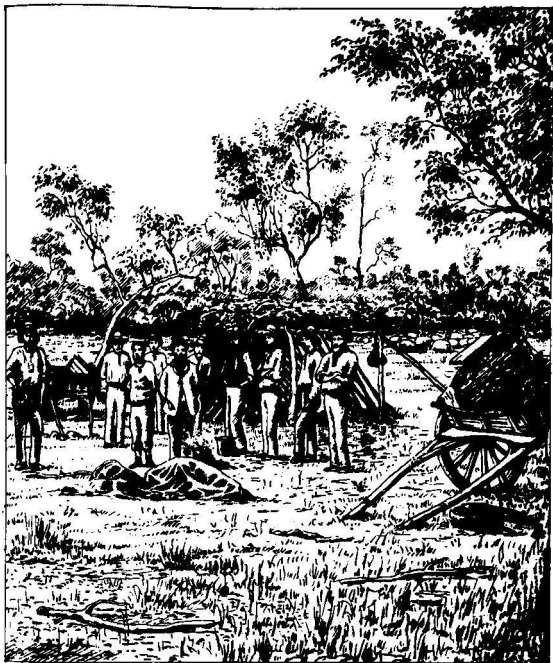
This is the ideological crux of the report. A land needs to be inhabited for the purposes of consolidating the colonial presence and expanding the economy of the Empire. Added to this, the military threat of a foreign colonial force occupying the northern regions was a further consideration. The type of people fitting Forrest's description above needed to be enticed into emigrating to the colony's northern districts for this to be accomplished. The amendment of land regulations could certainly encourage settlement in the north. But the provision of photographically derived images offers authoritative empirical



Etched by H. C. Prinssep from a Photograph by J. Forrest

MID-DAY CAMP IN SANDY BED OF ROBINSON RIVER,
KIMBERLEY DISTRICT, NORTH-WESTERN AUSTRALIA,
May 14th, 1888.

[Fig. 1 — *Mid-day Camp in Sandy Bed of Robinson River*]



Etched by J. C. Peinsep from a Photograph by J. Forrest.

CAMP OF THE "MEDA RIVER COMPANY," ON THE MAY RIVER,
KIMBERLEY DISTRICT, NORTH-WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

[Fig. 2 — *Camp of the 'Meda River Company', on the May River*]

evidence to substantiate claims of a pastoral future 'imagined' in the journal's travel narrative. However, an image only becomes empirical when it has been appropriated by an empirically based discourse.

In this 1883 expedition, a composite or hybridity is formed in the government report between photography and the language of travel narratives to unite elements of the picturesque that would be missing in both the visual and journal texts if presented autonomously. The landscape of the Kimberley was not the decaying picturesque landscape of an agrarian England, it was a new world landscape articulated within colonial discourses which change in order to accommodate difference. The two photographs by Forrest can be seen as a symbolic attempt to install an element of 'civilisation' within a landscape that has on occasion been described as 'unapproachable and inaccessible'. While such characterisations are an obstacle to colonial settlement, their impact is lessened by the provision of etchings with photographic origins illustrating colonial inhabitation.

In Forrest's 1883 diary, the taking of photographs is assigned to the bottom rung in the hierarchy of tasks performed on a return journey. This placement of photography was to shift dramatically over the next twenty years as the importance for 'displaying' the colony's wealth became increasingly recognised at the colonial exhibitions in order to attract investment and emigration. As such, the ways in which landscape photography is read alters according to the discourses that appropriate the images into meeting the particular ends of the colonial authority.

The representation of an 'unknown' landscape via a technology that is also in the process of being colonised discloses an ambivalence on behalf of the colonising knowledges and institutions. The landscape, as it appeared in exploration journals and photographs, effectively returns the gaze of the discriminating coloniser. The landscape can be considered a 'speaking' subject by the very act of its representation, complicating the authority of institutions to duplicate knowledge and presenting a challenge to colonial discourse to accommodate difference. Through the process of representation, the landscape modifies, or to use Bhabha's term, 'hybridises' the discourse that has represented it. (In this case, that of geographic exploration, but other institutional beneficiaries of the information obtained from exploration may also be included in this process.)

My project is to illuminate the range of discourses oscillating around exploration, posing a difficulty for Carter's reductionist account of exploration and photography which positions scientific geography and exploration/travel geography as mutually exclusive activities. Carter's thesis that exploration was an isolated activity in pursuit of experiences that led to the production of popular adventure narratives ignores the interconnectedness of colonial bureaucracy. The purpose of gaining detailed knowledge and classifying the contents of a land amounts to an encompassing project involving colonial sectors in as broad as possible way in an attempt to establish similarities and differences between the territories of the Empire. Classification provides a continuum for exploration; once a land has been mapped and its places named, the contents can then be explored *ad infinitum*.

The Linnean system of classification accords sight an importance that excludes the other senses as legitimate agents for interpreting the constitution of a land (Foucault 132-38). In this way, the picturesque was crucial for providing empirical proof of the contents of a land. However, for the picturesque to be embedded in scientific rationalist discourses, the techniques for representing picturesque locations also needed to be primarily defined by discourses of observation. Picturesque *sketches* made reference to their aesthetic origins, whereas when reproduced by photo-mechanical means, the pictur-

esque maintained authority as a result of exploration's appropriation of photography. What becomes evident in this shift in techniques of observation, as seen in the use of the picturesque in Forrest's 1883 expedition for example, is that it is not simply a process of one technique and system of explaining the land being superseded by another. The shift involves a continual interaction of discourses, disrupting any discursive hegemony within the activity of colonial exploration.

NOTES

1. See James A., 'Second 'King of Siluria: Roderick Murchison and the Imperial Theme in Geology', *Energy and Entropy: Science and Culture in Victorian Britain*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 63-92. See also Martin J.S. Rudwick, 'The Emergence of a Visual Language for Geological Science, 1760-1840', *History of Science* 14 (1976): 149-95.
2. Ann, Birmingham. *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 63-73. See also Simon Ryan, 'Exploring Aesthetics: The Picturesque Appropriation of Land in Journals of Australian Exploration', *Australian Literary Studies* 15:4 (Oct. 1992): 282-293.

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