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IAN BURN Beating About the Bush: The Landscapes of the Heidelberg School

The image of the Australian bush produced in the late nineteenth century by the artists of the Heidelberg school has mediated the relation to the bush of most people growing up in Australia during the past fifty or so years. Perhaps no other local imagery is so much a part of an Australian consciousness and ideological make-up.

Paintings by the artists of this school have been frequently reproduced and discussed at great length. Yet all this effort has yielded few insights into the ideological nature of the imagery or its enduring impact throughout most of this century. Moreover, one senses that not much more can be said with the current orthodox interpretations of the pictures. I want to outline below a basis for a reinterpretation which can begin to take account of these factors.

The key early examples among the landscape pictures of the Heidelberg school are Tom Roberts' *The Artists' Camp* and Frederick McCubbin's *The Lost Child* (illustrations 1 and 2). Both pictures were painted about 1886 at the artists' camp in the suburban bush at Box Hill and portray a very similar bush landscape. The pictures also record very similar attitudes about what to include and what to omit, in terms of how the bush is depicted. Both pictures present only a foreground and a close middle-ground; thick bush cuts off any sense of distance but for a few glimpses of sky. The horizon is placed high, so that each picture is mostly landscape and the viewer is located within it. Each contains a 'narrative' incident: the two artists cooking over their camp-fire, a young girl lost in the bush. Each incident is placed slightly awkwardly a little way in front of the middle-ground. The middle-ground is cut off and becomes an out-of-focus 'backcloth' of foliage and bush haze, with slender tree-trunks picked out by lighter or darker tones. The foreground is declared by the slender trunks of tall gums, which also serve to break up the picture space, framing the narrative incident and pushing it back into the picture, so making the viewer conscious of looking past or through the trees towards the incident. In each picture there are a number of sharply defined details—tufts of grass, foliage of spindly new growth, peeling bark—which attract our notice as we 'witness' the incident.[1]

While other kinds of bush landscape were subsequently depicted by these and other artists, especially Arthur Streeton, I want to argue that the *attitudes* which underlie these two pictures by Roberts and McCubbin are not violated but merely extended to encompass other types. So the first task is to analyse the attitudes reflected in these two pictures.

What are these attitudes? What do they tell us of the artists' *social relationship* to the bush landscape?

The first thing to notice is that any elements which might associate the image with the harshness of life in the bush, the hard labour of working the bush, the threat to farmers of bushfire and drought, or the original owners of the bush—the Aboriginals—are all omitted.[2] No hint of these remains. The bush is not seen through a 'worked' or 'lived' experience. It is not a thick forest to be cleared, sown with crops or turned into grazing land; it is not a rich resource for logging; nor does it appear as an obstacle to cross by foot

or horse. If we look at old photographs of bush workers and their families posing in front of their huts, it is hard to imagine that any part of *their* understanding is being represented. Not only is the idea of the harshness of bush life excluded, but there is no hint of the more pleasant sides of bush living, the sorts of fun and pastimes which can be enjoyed only by country people. No—this view of the bush does not accord with the reality of the bush as experienced by the small selector or bush worker.

But neither is it the reality of the bush as understood by the squatters or pastoralists, that is, its significance as economic value. The bush landscape as depicted by Roberts and McCubbin conveys no sense of itself as landed property.[3]

The people depicted in the pictures are *visitors* to the bush, very much like Roberts and McCubbin themselves were. The pictures reveal only those aspects of the bush which would be pleasurable to someone from the city having a day out or a brief holiday in the country. The bush is 'nice and cosy', fresh, clean and tamed; it displays its attractive and recreative qualities for people who do not live there.

Yet there is a note of threat in the McCubbin picture. What kind of threat? The threat of a child becoming lost in the bush. What kind of child? A young girl, well-dressed in clothes suitable for a picnic in the bush or a leisurely stroll along a well-worn track through part of

1 Tom Roberts, *The Artists' Camp*, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 60.8 cm, 1886. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

2 Frederick McCubbin, *The Lost Child*, oil on canvas, 114.3 x 72.4 cm, 1886. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

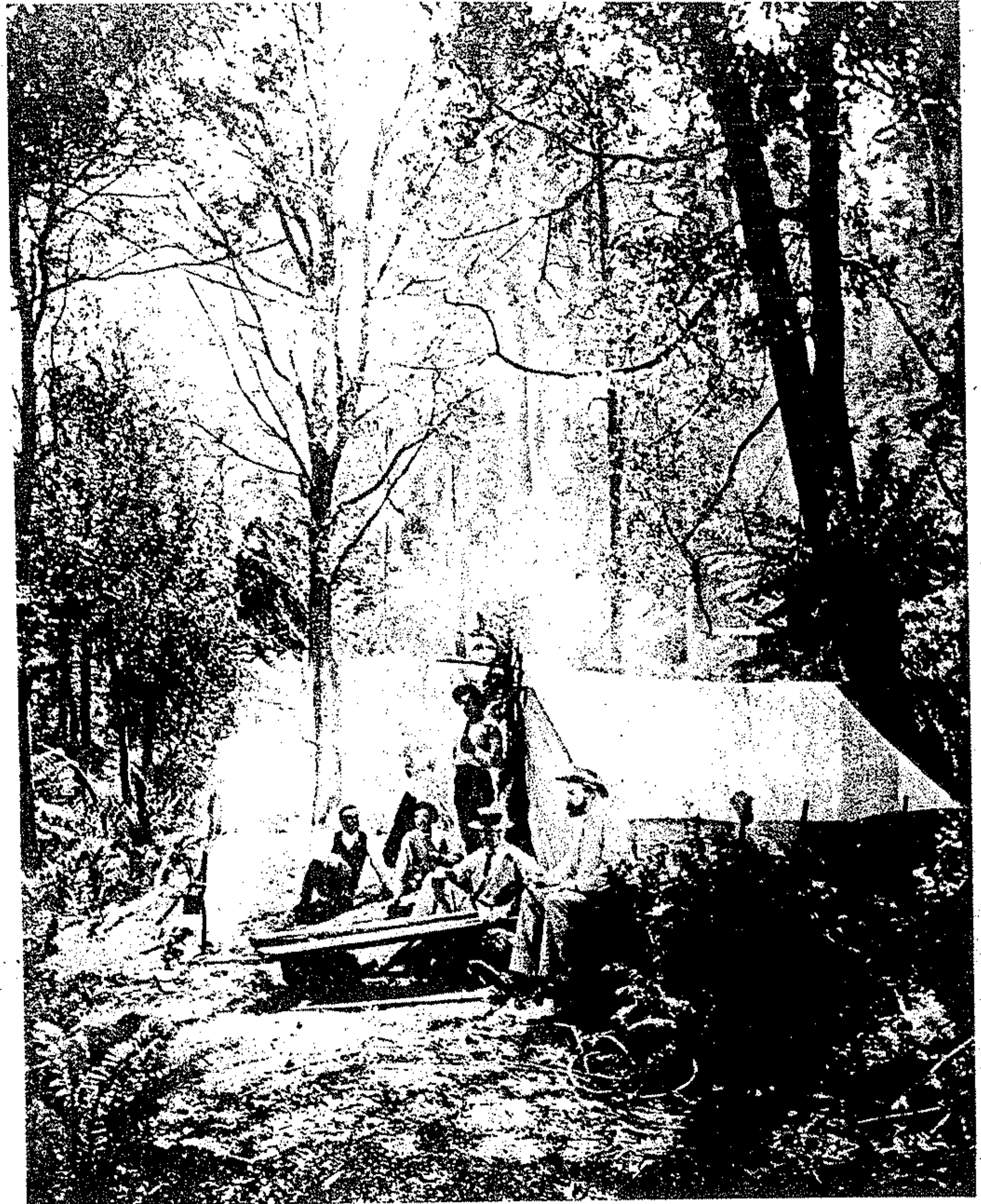
the bush. She has strayed away and, with little practical experience of the bush, she does not know what to do. The threat which is depicted is not addressed to families who live in or nearby the bush and are familiar with it. It is addressed to those *visiting* the bush. It is a fear appropriate to city people.[4]

The people in the pictures are city folk and the incidents narrated are part of the social relationship to the bush of an urban class. The perception of the bush which the artists have portrayed conforms to *their* social relationship.

The next question must be more specific—to *what class* of city folk does this perception of the bush belong? An indication is given in illustration 3. The photograph shows a camp in the bush, not unlike that depicted in the picture by Roberts. The text under the photograph describes the scene in this way:

> Australian professional men frequently spend their summer vacation in camping in the bush. It is such a camp which is depicted here, its arcadian simplicity is evident. The campers live out their holidays in the open air . . . sketching, photographing, botanizing, fishing, till on their return to town they are bronzed and hearty specimens of humanity ready to face the toils and the stress of the cities with new vigour.

Analysing the whole text we get the following: (i) the bush described in terms of 'familiar', 'beautiful scenery', 'arcadian simplicity', 'tempting spots', 'abundance'; (ii) the relation-



A BUSH CAMP, Tasmania.—This delightful scene represents a familiar aspect of the summer life of Tasmania. Walking tours are exceedingly popular on the island, the beautiful scenery of which annually attracts large numbers of tourists. Australian professional men frequently spend their summer vacation in camping in the Tasmanian bush. It is such a camp that is depicted here, and its arcadian simplicity is evident. The camp is on the river Levin, a beautiful stream on the north-west coast. The river abounds with fish, and all along its banks are to be found tempting spots for the tent, sheltered from both sun and wind, and with wood and water in abundance at hand. The campers live out their holiday in the open air, taking their turn to cook the meals of the party, sketching, photographing, botanising, fishing, till on their return to town they are bronzed and hearty specimens of humanity ready to face the toils and the stress of the cities with new vigour. Outside the tent with its calico fly is the familiar tripod from which is suspended the inevitable billy. A couple of slabs serve as tables, and the equipment is of the simplest.

3 From *Federated Australia—its Sceneries and Splendours*, published by Charles Taylor, London, n.d.

ship to the bush being one of 'walking tours', 'tourists', 'camping', 'summer vacation', 'holiday'; (iii) this relationship existed for 'Australian professional men' from the city, 'sketching, photographing, botanizing, fishing'; (iv) they did this for the 'open air' and the amazing recuperative powers of the bush.

This example suggests that there existed a very well-formed and conventionally held idea of what constituted 'the bush' and what did not. It spells out a particular *social relationship* to the bush. It also makes clear *for whom this relationship existed:* the urban educated upper-middle class. A sensitivity to the recuperative or health-restoring qualities of the bush was apparently available only to those who could take a certain *intellectual* pleasure in it. The suggestion is that this relationship is the domain of the urban bourgeoisie.

The text quoted above is from a book published to celebrate Federation at the turn of the century. But was that relationship to the bush as well formed in Australia in 1885 when Roberts and McCubbin began their bush pictures? There are many examples to indicate that it was. If we look through the numerous illustrated publications which appeared during the 1880s we can find many illustrations showing the urban bourgeoisie 'taking in nature', as well as illustrations highlighting the aspects of nature they would most appreciate (for examples, see illustrations 4 and 5). Or take the example of the National Park (unfortunately now called the Royal National Park) just south of Sydney, which contains a variety of natural bushland. It was established in 1879. It was the second national park in the world—Yellowstone National Park in the United States was established in 1872. While both were decreed to preserve areas in their 'natural' state, Yellowstone has a claim to uniqueness in geological terms. In contrast, what were considered here to be worthy of national park status were not spectacular areas like Ku-ring-gai Chase or the Blue Mountains, but instead luxurious but intimate bush areas and beaches, which incorporated examples of 'the most characteristic and beautiful features' within this 'bit of original Australia'. Quoting further from the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia,* volume 1, published in 1886, the Park is described as 'the largest of all the metropolitan pleasure grounds' and contains an

4 From *The Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*, vol. 1, The Picturesque Atlas Publishing Co., 1886

5 George Ashton, 'Easter pedestrian tourists; noonday halt at the Black Spur', engraving from the *Australasian Sketcher*, 23 April 1881

abundance of those situations experienced picnickers seek out . . . a wilderness for those who like the change from hot and dusty streets . . . a place where the labours and worries of town may be temporarily forgotten, and where on holidays the multitude may get out and find scope for the free enjoyment of all innocent natural propensities.[5]

The concept of a national park institutionalizes one form of the 'visiting' relation to the bush, as well as providing an ostensive definition of the bush or wilderness. In the quoted passage, two importantly *different* types of visitors and relations to the bush are noted. On the one hand is 'the multitude'—on the other are 'experienced picnickers', 'those who like the change from hot and dusty streets' and who need to forget 'the labours and worries of town'. On visiting the Park, the multitude return to a state of innocence and naturalness, like children at play. But the others visit the Park for quiet leisure and recuperation, for the uplifting experience of an unhurried carriage drive or stroll through some of the more 'pure bush' spots, maybe even doing some sketching, photographing or botanizing.

This description, written at the same time that Roberts and McCubbin were beginning their bush pictures, implies two different *social classes* of visitors, urban bourgeois and urban working class (including in this group the small business section of the petty bourgeoisie), and further implies a different *social relationship* appropriate to each class. The image of the bush that Roberts and McCubbin provided connects rather more readily to a relationship of contemplation and educated appreciation than it does to a likely site to romp around in like children. This is nowhere more clearly stated than by Roberts himself, when he writes that they had tried:

to look into the deep, quiet face of nature; lingering where the wandering almost silent river bathes the feathery wattle branches; sometimes on a hillside watching the sun setting over range and valley, the cool shadows rising on the soft pile of the hills go distant, more distant in the grey dusk until the moon rises in the quiet east; finding beauty in odd corners of some country shanty, or by some lagoon . . . all bathed in a great shimmer of trembling, brilliant sunlight . . .[6]

The social relationship which is dominant in the bush pictures by Roberts and McCubbin is *specific* to the educated urban upper-middle class of the period. That is to say, *inherent* in the way the artists saw and related to the bush are the values and relations of *their* class ideology. While it has been long established that the artists associated most closely with the bourgeois intelligentsia and professionals, and that this section was looked upon as both audience and prospective market for their pictures, the point that is being stressed here is that *the way of looking and depicting* the bush landscape is also specific to that class or class section. That is, the way of seeing inherent in these pictures *corresponds* to the way the urban bourgeoisie 'saw' the world and itself.

That is a very general point, but it carries significant implications for interpretation of the whole range of imagery of the period. For example, given the argument put forward above, what is the relationship of the bush image of the Heidelberg painters to the image of the bush produced by writers like Lawson, Paterson, Furphy, and others associated with the *Bulletin*? The painters' perception of the bush seems *contradictory* to the perception of the writers. The latter's vision is not a rural arcady, but more an environment of material hardship which brings out ideal and admirable qualities in people. For the *Bulletin* writers the cultivation of a bush ideal was not 'the transmission to the city of values nurtured on the bush frontier, so much as the projection onto the outback of values revered by an *alienated* urban intelligentsia. How far itinerant bush workers absorbed these values, or shared them already, remains an open question'.[7] (emphasis added)

Our discussion so far of the bush pictures of Roberts and McCubbin makes the case that they too are a projection from the city, but not of values of an *alienated* urban intelligentsia. The contradictoriness is perhaps more apparent in the opposing attitudes

towards the city. The artists applied the same way of looking to their views of the city, but only to certain types of urban-scapes. They saw no 'dusty, dirty city' whose 'foetid air . . . spreads its foulness over all'; they heard no 'fiendish rattle of the tramways and the buses'.[8] The view of the city was 'laundered' in much the same way as was the bush—with the additional point that there are few, if any, signs of urban progress. Perhaps that is not surprising, since all sense of rural progress has been excluded from the bush pictures. The idea of a rural arcady is strongly fixed within a nostalgic sentiment; thus it is possible that the views of the city were also shaped by nostalgia.[9] On the other hand, Lawson, Paterson, and most of the other writers associated with the *Bulletin*, were addicted to the city but railed against its vices and squalor, including much that is linked with urban progress. Their vision of the bush, which emerged in the late 1880s, was an *anti-type* of the city. Thus the writers' increasingly dismal view of the city is connected to the emergence of the bush ideal, the tendency to describe the bush in mythic or legendary proportions.[10]

Indeed, Russel Ward recently argued that the 'legendary view of Australia . . . can be said to have been conditioned by the English vision of rural arcady [an important influence on Roberts' and McCubbin's vision] only in the sense that it was *a total negation* of the latter'[11] (emphasis added). While this idea of total negation serves the kind of argument that Ward is making, at the same time the vision of rural arcady and the legendary view reflect very different and conflicting kinds of social and political consciousness.

If this is so, then the following appears to be the case. Only a short time after the painters developed the means of representing rural arcady in the form of the Australian landscape, their ideas began to be invaded by the same vision which was inspiring the writers. The painters began to rethink the bush as 'the Bush with a capital B'. However this entailed an attempt to integrate two strongly conflicting ways of looking at the bush. This contradiction was never really resolved by the artists, so most of the pictures of bushrangers and workers can be 'read' as various degrees of imposition of one way of seeing onto another. Or—put another way—what resulted was an imposition of a social ideology which contradicted the social content inherent in the aesthetic ideology of the artists' work.

The contradiction is least able to be disguised in pictures like Streeton's *'Fire's On', Lapstone Tunnel* (1891), which includes a scene showing the body of a worker killed by an explosion being carried out on a stretcher, but in which the potential for a mythic idealization of the event is negated by the way of seeing the landscape itself. Admittedly, the contradiction obtains an illusion of resolution in some instances, but this is only when the subject-matter itself embodies or *symbolizes* the mystique of the bush ideal (e.g., in Roberts' *Bailed Up, The Breakaway*, and to some extent his shearing pictures). In these cases the way of perceiving the landscape dominates, and the artists' major concern appears to be the discovery of a similar intellectual and aesthetic beauty in the subject-matter of the bush legends.

In order to take this discussion further, we now need a precise analysis of the pictures themselves. The first step, as a prerequisite, has been to establish the class specificity of the imagery. However *interpretation of that imagery cannot be deduced from any general class ideology*. Images themselves are not determined by class values, however it is the class values which set the limits within which a range of possible imagery can occur. What then were the limits of the Heidelberg imagery?

A striking feature of the story of the Heidelberg school is the *rapidity* with which a definitive range of imagery was developed. The first examples seem to embody a fairly complete definition. While the reference of the definition is extended, the definition is not

altered in any substantial fashion. This suggests two things. One is that the definition had to be 'possible', i.e. technically and iconographically there had to be enough sources to draw on to suggest the rapid innovation of the imagery. These are not only the European traditions (which have been well accounted for by Bernard Smith and Virginia Spate[12]), but also sources in the popular press of the day, the black-and-white engravings[13], as well as in the ongoing work of 'minor' illustrative artists in Australia. The second point it suggests is that this way of seeing the bush had to 'feel right' for the artists. That is, there had to be some sense of a visual match between the picture and the social relationship to the bush, and this match had to be recognizable by the artists when they had achieved it. In other words, the class specificity of the imagery had to be shared by the artists.[14]

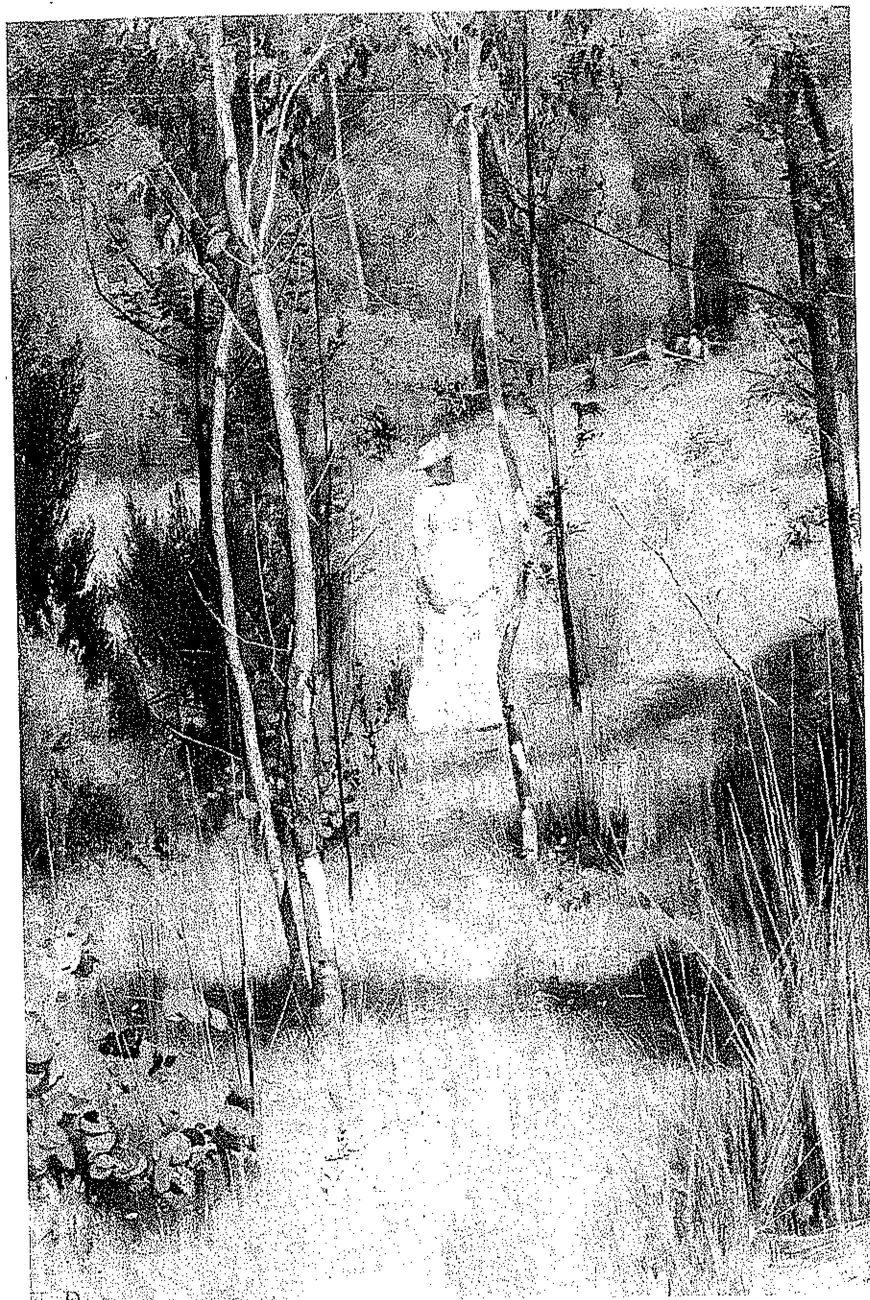
Given this, what are the pictorial characteristics of the bush imagery? A fleeting impressionistic (not Impressionist) view of the bush was adopted. This view was then filled in with selected details which were sharply delineated. Virginia Spate, in her book on Tom Roberts, discusses Roberts' uncertainty about representation of space. Having abandoned the traditional use of tonal contrasts to create a sense of space, Roberts tried 'to provide new space indicators by unobtrusive framing devices like the trees, tufts of grass and leaves in the foreground and middleground'. The attempt to use elements of the bush as space markers characterizes various of Roberts' paintings during this period, as well as works by McCubbin and Streeton.[15] Spate argues that in observing a landscape Roberts 'seemed to focus separately on different aspects of the view and he incorporated these separate observations in the painting'. Elsewhere Spate speaks of Roberts' habit of composing by 'successive observations', so that the viewer has difficulty in getting a sense of the whole and instead, is forced 'to look at the painting focus by focus, detail by detail . . .'[16]

To a greater or lesser extent this feature is characteristic of how we look at all the pictures by the artists of the Heidelberg school during its early phase. Its significance is this: the way of 'reading' the picture is consistent with the way someone visiting the bush notices details; it is a leisurely and contemplative gaze not tempered by any organized or practical experience of the bush. Sitting quietly or strolling slowly, one's gaze follows random patterns, one detail attracting attention and then another.

This differs greatly from the pictorial conventions (and thus the way of seeing) of Buvelot and other artists working earlier in Australia. Before everything else, Buvelot presents us with an organized, well-constructed, distanced 'whole' landscape, which we 'enter' through an invitational figure (or a cow, a fence, or some other 'note of civilization'). We relate to the landscape largely through that figure; and once 'inside' a Buvelot landscape we notice and pick out in a varying sequence details which interest us. But this process is dominated by a sense of the whole. In contrast, what a viewer can pick out in the Heidelberg pictures is restricted to a far greater extent by the artist and the sense of *predetermination* of the significance of details is far stronger. So the Heidelberg pictures advance a much more precise and specific *definition* of what is 'the bush'.

The Barbizon-type landscapes of Buvelot do not confront us with a definition of the bush in this way, and the range of bush details which might stand as constituents of a definition of the bush is far broader. Thus the implication is that, in the Heidelberg pictures, the range of possible ways of seeing the bush is being circumscribed, so that not just the 'look' of a particular landscape is being presented within a set of pictorial conventions, but a set of pictorial conventions is being used to *advance* a definition of the bush landscape. The effect is to impose onto the viewer a *singular* way of seeing and relating to the bush.

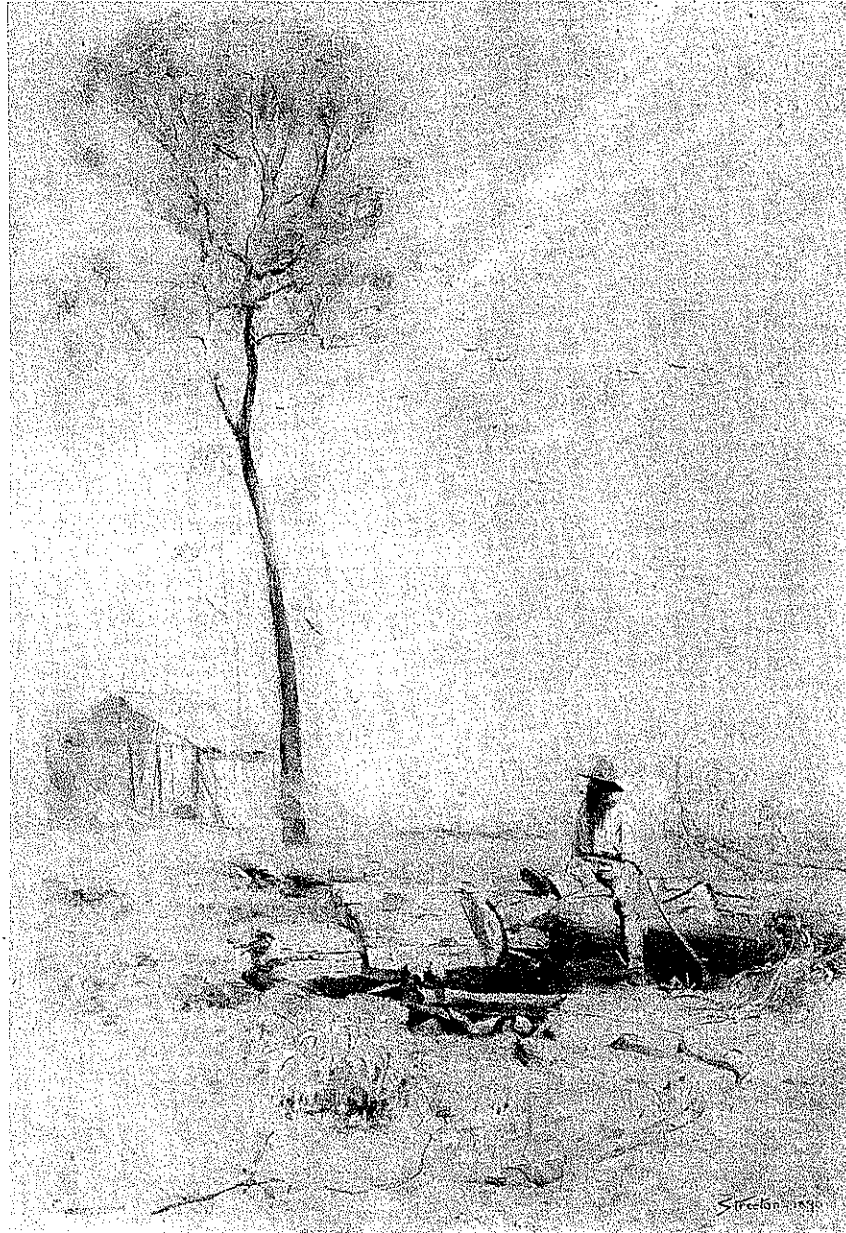
A brief comment is required here about the assumptions on which I am proceeding.



6 Tom Roberts, *A Summer Morning's Tiff*, oil on canvas, 74.2 x 50.1 cm, 1887. Ballarat Art Gallery

This is an ideological interpretation of a particular range of imagery; it does not pretend to deal with the entire range of any artist's work. My aim is to focus on *the most frequently reproduced* landscape pictures, the images most frequently used to imply (in symbolic form) a sense of Australian-ness or national identity. While there are many hazards in such an approach, at the same time it reflects a crucial form in which the images have come down to us through the twentieth century and so is central to any discussion of its ideological nature. The main works under consideration in this section are as follows: McCubbin: *The Lost Child* (1886) (2), *A Bush Burial* (1890); Roberts: *The Artists' Camp* (1886) (1), *A Summer Morning's Tiff* (1887) (6), *Holiday Sketch at Coogee* (1888); Streeton: *Golden Summer* (1889), *Twilight Pastoral* (1889), *Still Glides the Stream and Shall Forever Glide* (1890), *The Selector's Hut* (1890) (7), *Near Heidelberg* (1890) (8), *'Fire's On', Lapstone Tunnel* (1891), *Purple Noon's Transparent Might* (1896). Some of the genre pictures are also being considered, since there is a predominance of landscape in many of them. These include Roberts' *The Breakaway* (1891), *Bailed Up* (1895) and *The Splitters* (c. 1886).[17]

Listed earlier were some of the social aspects which were excluded from the Heidelberg



7 Arthur Streeton, *The Selector's Hut*, oil on canvas, 66 x 35.5 cm, 1890. Australian National Gallery, Canberra

painters' definition of the bush. But what characteristics of the bush were selected to carry the definition? And why? Recurring through the above range of bush pictures are a set of *motifs* which occur in different combinations and arrangements. There are four or five which recur with considerable frequency (though there may be others). These are not the elements of personal style to which every artist has recourse; these motifs play a more directly *social* role. The definition of the bush is achieved largely through the presence and arrangement of these motifs. Where once the artists needed the presence of a narrative specific to the urban bourgeoisie, e.g., a finely dressed young lady visiting the bush, the same social meaning can be produced by the landscape motifs. The social (and ideological) meaning of the pictures resides in the common 'language' of the motifs. The imprint of one of the motifs on a related type of landscape is enough to extend the definition to include that type.

The following are the main motifs:

(i) *A tall, slender variety of gum tree, generally solitary and silhouetted*

This motif occurs in all the above mentioned works. Its evolution begins in close-up in the two pictures of Roberts and McCubbin discussed earlier; it then is used to impress an 'Australian-ness' onto pictures like Roberts' *Coogee* (which otherwise might look like any

place), and is adopted and repeated by Streeton in an often exaggerated form through pictures like his *Twilight Pastoral, The Selector's Hut* and *Near Heidelberg* (8).

This motif is not merely a decorative framing device, though it often serves that end as well. Moreover, it is of some consequence that this is the first time the gum tree is used so directly for its decorative qualities in a 'high' art tradition. But of more concern to this discussion is that in the context in which these painters worked the motif is used to generate a social-symbolic meaning. A clear example of this is in Streeton's *The Selector's Hut* (1890) (7). The solitary gum tree becomes a symbol for the solitary life of the selector, as well as a symbol of his resilience. However by comparing Streeton's painting to Conder's of the same scene, *Under a Southern Sky*, we can notice how the selectivity, arrangement and emphasis build up the social symbolism and meaning. Conder's picture informs us that the selector is not alone but has his family and child with him, while the background landscape suggests that the locale is not nearly as lonely and isolated as Streeton would have us believe.

Today there can be no question that these gum tree symbols carry a heavy ideological load. To accept that they could be used in the late 1880s to produce meaning in these

8 Arthur Streeton, *Near Heidelberg*, oil on canvas, 52.1 x 39.5 cm, 1890. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

terms depends to a large extent on the acceptance of the argument made in the first part of this essay. What might a young or slender gum tree have symbolized to an urban 'professional man' of the period? A list might run something like this . . . youthful, growing, expanding, optimistic, new, striving, unconstrained, uncluttered by old or dead wood, fresh, free, independent. Furthermore, with a number of the pictures, the tree acts as the 'point-of-entry' into the landscape, so that a viewer frequently identifies with the tree before anything else. This is not just an empathy with aspects of the bush, since such empathy is fundamental to the relationship to the bush which is being depicted (and presupposed). Moreover, what is being projected by the viewer is self-reinforcing. What is achieved is a virtual state of symbiosis. In contrast to this, the viewer is left with a *voyeuristic* feeling towards people depicted in the landscape. This is consistent with the argument made earlier about the point-of-view being that of a *visitor* to the bush: either you see bush workers from within the context of your leisure time and place, or you see other visitors as interlopers onto your leisure-time territory.

(ii) *Spindly new (eucalyptus) growth in the immediate foreground* often with wildflowers and tussocks of grass picked out in sharp detail. This kind of detailing seems almost to grow out of the bottom edge of the picture, and again the viewer is made conscious of peering over and through these bush details. With a number of the bush pictures the viewer feels 'unnaturally' close to these foreground details, as if the viewer is crouching—this is particularly the case with *The Artist's Camp, The Lost Child, The Selector's Hut* and others. The effect is to heighten the voyeuristic feeling towards the people depicted, while reinforcing the viewer's feeling of the sanctuary of the bush. While this effect may be partly the result of the artist sitting or squatting while painting the picture, the detailing is too pronounced for that to be accepted as the sole explanation.

This motif is also important in the 'space marker' sense and is commonly used to define the space in the foreground of the picture. When this kind of definition is omitted, the resulting picture tends to lose any strong sense of depth. While it is a common device of painters to use objects or details in the immediate foreground in order to create depth, it is the *luxuriance* of these details that is being commented on here; one's eye is led into the picture by a sequence of *arcadian* details.

(iii) *Close tonal relationship between the sky and the distant or horizon landscape*

This device establishes an effect of strong sunlight flooding down into the foreground bush (as, for example, in all the Streetons mentioned above), or of hazy light suffusing the bush landscape (as in the two McCubbins and Roberts' *The Artists' Camp* and *A Summer Morning's Tiff*). The tendency is to reduce the landscape to a sequence of close-toned horizontal bands, against which other motifs and details are picked out. This motif achieves its most reduced symbolic form in the opening at the back of the shed in Roberts' *Shearing the Rams*; the three close tones with mild changes in hue represent paddock, trees and sky, and form a discrete tricolour 'flag', which announces the 'Australian-ness' of the shearing scene and provides a 'psychological' focus for all the activity in the shed. This motif depends on the landscape being high-keyed, with no great tonal contrasts occurring within it. Often the sense of sunlight flooding downwards is reinforced by the strong vertical stripe of a gum tree. This presence of sunlight, either direct or suffused, as a recurring theme emerges as part of the bush symbolism.

(iv) *An exaggerated blue sky*

This appears in the early 1890s and is used frequently by Streeton (e.g., *The Selector's Hut* and *Fire's On*, and many of his Sydney Harbour views) and occasionally by Roberts (e.g., *The Breakaway*). It creates the effect of a landscape *bleached out* by sunlight and

dominated by sky. In order to sustain this effect the artist is obliged to treat the landscape in special ways, gently modulating to bring out form rather than building up contrasts, defining shapes almost in drawn outline, while the dominating hue of the sky 'pushes' the landscape back from our gaze. In some of his Harbour views Streeton 'inverts' this motif, exaggerating the blue of the water while giving a close tonal relationship between the sky and horizon landscape. A similar effect is achieved nonetheless, the area of blue 'keys' the colour range and determines the light and space of the picture. (It reminds one of the device sometimes used by the French Impressionists of inserting a patch of pure red in their pictures as a way of keying up the colour.)

While not a motif in quite the same sense, Streeton's treatment of the distance and middle-distance should be mentioned here. In a picture like Streeton's *Golden Summer*, the 'veil' of thick bush has been lifted, and the distance depicted without it appearing as an enormous expanse which is both mysterious and vaguely threatening, a vast unknown. Such a feeling about distance tends to pervade the landscapes of Chevalier, von Guérard, and (to a slightly lesser extent) Buvelot. In contrast, Streeton's depiction of distance sustains the same harmony and arcadian evocation as the foregrounds and middle-grounds of the other pictures.

During the period of the works under discussion, for about the first ten years, the artists kept returning to one or other combination of these motifs. They relied on the motifs to give compositional structure to the pictures, as well as to establish meaning. The strength and clarity of the meaning conveyed depends on the selectivity and arrangement of the motifs, and on their ability to exclude other meanings.

But what about all the bush motifs and details which may be seen as no less characteristic but which never appear in the Heidelberg pictures? If one relies on a set of motifs to carry an effect, then it is plain that only a *limited* type of bush landscape can be depicted. Why such a narrow range of types of urbanscapes and of bush landscapes, and nothing in between? Why, for example, was there reticence about representing aspects of country towns, places which played such an important role in rural life? Why are these and many others excluded from the Heidelberg imagery? It is hard to believe it was because the artists were seeking the 'typical' or 'essence' of the Australian landscape. It seems more likely the case that a certain *type* of bush, and a certain way of assembling the type via a set of motifs, achieved the most direct expression of the social (class) relationship. That is, the 'essence' which is depicted is a specific 'essence' of the urban bourgeoisie.

What is happening when a person sees the landscape in terms of *types* of bush? If a thing is seen as a type, then it is looked at in terms of type characteristics, or motifs which can stand for the type, rather than seeing and examining what it is. Consider for a moment the way the Heidelberg artists depicted workers in the bush setting. Workers appear not just as incidents in the bush, but as incidents *of* the bush (and a viewer sees and relates to them in that way too). The artists have seen and depicted the workers within the context of a leisure time and place. The workers have no lives of their own, no pasts or futures, no conflicts or struggles, no joy or emotions.[18] We observe them with detachment, while they are already detached from their real lives. Why is this? Isn't it because the artists are not really interested in the workers as people, but only as *bush types*, the 'human spirit' of the bush? Could the artists be as interested in the urban proletariat? No—the artists are not interested in the social reality of the workers *as a class* or as *individual members* of a class. The artists are creating an idealization of the workers' role, their characteristic activity. This need not exclude sympathetic feelings towards the workers. There may be sympathy, even respect (and even a feeling on the part of the artists of being 'fellow-workers')—but the relationship within which that may occur is prescribed. The sympathy or respect is

towards the worker via the worker's work-type. *Who* he is, is determined by *what* he does.[19]

That point is important to make, because the social relationship which is perhaps more clearly discernible in the depiction of bush workers is the *same* relationship which shaped how artists saw the bush landscape. The depiction of a landscape is no less ideological, thus no less 'political', than the depiction of themes of work. Indeed its ideological impact can be and has been far greater due to the apparent absence of 'workerist' themes. To perceive workers as types, not individuals, not members of a class, is a reflection of how the urban bourgeoisie sees the world and itself. To perceive the bush (i.e., to define it as so) as a restricted and exclusive set of types of bush establishes one class relationship to the bush and denies the possibility of other class relationships. Accept this definition of the bush, learn to love the bush in this and only this way, and *you identify yourself* within a set of social relations of the class which dominates our lives.

To summarize the argument so far: the relationship to the bush which is depicted resides with the educated urban capitalist class of the period. The type of bush landscape selected conforms to an expression of a social relationship of that class. Searching for a 'self-symbolism', it discovered that symbolism in a 'way of seeing' the bush. The portrayal of the landscape in a positive class-specific manner conveyed the idea that the *existing order* of society was also positive, timeless and unassailable. In other words, our middle-class visitor identifies himself (perhaps herself?) in this youthful, expansive, unconstrained arcadian image. He is at one with nature. He exists in the image of nature. He *is* nature.

Such an interpretation is far from out of the question. As outlined here it still contains a few intuitive leaps. With a little more painstaking research these could be reconstructed in a persuasive fashion. We would then have the basis of a reinterpretation of the bush imagery of the Heidelberg school which *locates it within a history of the development of visual culture and ideology in Australia*. The history of this imagery then becomes a history which includes the following account.

In its initial development the imagery entailed particular ideological characteristics. These are what have been outlined in this essay so far. During the 1890s the images underwent a partial re-evaluation. Then again, after the First World War, the 1890s were reinterpreted—and by and large this appears as the ideological form in which it reaches us today. This history can be elaborated as follows.

The first 'layer' of interpretation which must be negotiated in trying to understand the bush imagery within a current perspective is that of the post First World War period. What happened then? During the 1920s the bush imagery was widely popularized; the images acquired a 'national' emphasis and it was claimed for the artists that they had been concerned with producing images of 'the national life of Australia'. Following the first War, the feeling was strong in Australia that the horror and chaos which Europe had just experienced was the logical outcome of the development of urban industrialized societies. It was believed by many that Australia could escape a similar fate only by 'a return to the soil', by maintaining itself as a non-industrial, rural society, the sort of 'natural' society symbolized by the arcadian imagery of the Heidelberg school. Thus the influential critic, J.S. MacDonald, could write of the paintings of Arthur Streeton: 'They point to the way in which life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories . . . If we so choose we can yet be the elect of the world, the last of the pastoralists, the thoroughbred Aryans in all their nobility'.[20] The artists and writers of the 1880s and 1890s were re-cast as giants, the like of whom we would be lucky to see again.[21] Among the artists Streeton was singled out (partly through his own efforts) as the leading figure—and his late formula-ridden landscapes achieved a peak of popularity. Only later

was Roberts' leadership in the Heidelberg group appreciated again.[22] Today it is conventional to speak of Roberts, McCubbin, Streeton and Conder as 'the first to capture the true vision of the country, to break away from the idealized interpretations that went before'[23]—and all that follows must be built on this foundation. The late 1880s and 1890s were heralded as *the* beginning, everything preceding that period had been incapable of grasping the essence of the 'true Australia'. Vague concepts of egalitarianism or mateship, of democracy and nationalism, all deriving their stimulus from life in the bush, were crudely overlaid the images of the bush. Aspects of the pictures were singled out for a significance they never really had, while other aspects, and indeed the diversity of the work as a whole, were ignored. It has been argued that this interpretation of the period 'has been a potent force for the conservatism in Australian literature and culture generally'.[24] In this sense, the bush pictures of the Heidelberg school have perhaps served the conservatism of the ruling economic and political interests too well.

The strong rural, anti-industrial sentiment emerged at a time when Australian capitalists were being forced into increased industrialization.[25] The economy was being restructured increasingly around manufacturing, and a new emphasis on 'Australian-made' products was being sold to the buying public. If the 1920s was the period when the bush imagery was lodged within our ideological make-up in roughly the form in which it still occurs, then it is necessary to examine the role that the imagery played *both* in the generation of nostalgia for a pastoral way of life *and*, symbolically, in support of a gearing up of the economy towards a more highly industrialized society. It is important to note that a bush arcady is neither competitive with nor antagonistic towards an industrialized way of life. So was there at that time a transformation wrought upon our relation to the bush image? Given the class specificity of the imagery, and despite its appropriation by anti-industrial protagonists, it could not be antagonistic towards an industrialized urban way of life. In other words, such an ideological function was *implicit* in the imagery from the beginnings of its development.

What then do we make of the re-evaluation which was placed on the bush imagery during the 1890s? While the writers and, in a contradictory form, the painters projected bush life in legendary proportions, the period seems to contain little awareness of *itself* in any mythic scale.[26] It was a time of severe depression and high unemployment, a time when our dependent links with British capital were being seriously questioned again. There surfaced a renewed desire for a more independent economy. It has been argued by some writers that this automatically led to a great national culture. But such accounts obscure the real complexities of the period. The difficulty with nationalisms, besides the elusive nature of their 'contents', is that they tend to gloss over class lines, so an account which gives priority to the idea of a nationalist ethos cannot adequately explain class-derived characteristics. The contradictory perceptions of the painters and writers need to be accounted for against a background of the internal conflicts within the class structure of the period. Against this background the contradictory 'ways of seeing' can be interpreted in some instances as contradictions between and within social classes. I will outline one area in which this contradiction is clear in class terms. The question of land probably recurs as the major political question during the nineteenth century in Australia. The key struggle during the latter half of the century was not between an emerging bourgeoisie and a developing working class, but rather between the urban bourgeoisie and the old squattocracy or pastoralists. The rural and urban working classes saw some of their interests allied to the urban middle class in their efforts to 'unlock the land', to open up the land for small selectors. The growth of militant rural-based unions, with their conflicts with the pastoral land-owners, indirectly served the interests of the urban capitalists. As the

economic crisis approached and unemployment rose through the late 1880s, the demand to open up the land became strident again. A theme which surfaces through some of the writers' work is support for land reform, something which is markedly absent in the work of the painters. The perception of the bush as depicted by the painters reflects a social relation to the landscape which seems exclusive of the idea of land reform. So the re-evaluation placed on the bush imagery during the 1890s (in part imposed by the artists themselves) is the initial conflation of the contradictory ideologies, their 'unification' into a populist national identity.

In this essay a different interpretation of the bush images has been outlined, one which reveals their ideological nature, and some of the significant social and political contexts in which that ideology became specific have been sketched in also. A further comment is now possible. In the late nineteenth century the bush imagery was associated with a section of the local bourgeoisie which can be seen to have had progressive tendencies. It was a class section which was prepared to accept European models reinterpreted (reinvented?) in terms of local landscape types and motifs, a section which appreciated the need for an independent cultural identity, as well as some of the political and economic preconditions for that. The nature of the bush imagery is complex, and not free from contradictions. In the political climate in which it developed, the imagery corresponded to a progressive element in the urban bourgeoisie, an element not free from contradictions itself.

During the later period, between the two World Wars, the imagery again obliquely served a progressive end in the context of building up the local manufacturing base and a concomitant pride in locally made products. However its progressiveness during this period was of a distinctly different kind to its earlier form, and might be regarded as almost exploitative of it. The pictures are no longer upheld as expressions of the 'cultural independence' of a specific section of the urban bourgeoisie, but serve to symbolize a national cultural independence and nationalist pride. In the latter case, however, the imagery supports not a progressive section of the bourgeoisie but a rather conservative section, a section which built up the manufacturing sector under threat, in order to survive. The difficulty of drawing stronger conclusions at this point is due to the lack of a detailed class analysis of the entire period, one which allows special reference to 'cultured' sections and which reveals correspondences to ideological points-of-view. This and other essays in this volume are contributing towards such an analysis.

The Heidelberg painters taught us to *see* our bush environment in a new way, but at the same time *distorted* our comprehension of that environment. The pictures allude to a reality of the bush, but embody the illusions of a class 'way of seeing'. In the context of the late nineteenth century, that class perception had progressive elements within it. During the twentieth century, the bush imagery has been used increasingly to serve the ends of the most conservative sections in this society. Thus the continuing pre-eminence of the Heidelberg imagery as *the* definition of the Australian landscape reflects the continuing domination of our society by the same class interests.