FFARINGTON'S EYE

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Overview

This paper is about observing a scene and then interpreting it in order to communicate the experience to others. The end product, the description of people, places or events, is evident. When this is compared to the original - the people, terrains, flora and fauna, or happenings - discrepancies often become apparent. We say the recorder, scribe, artist or raconteur, got it wrong. However, why should this be so? What is it that blights the eye and twists the mind to produce a distorted vision and version? The answer lies in culture.

The observer approaches the scene with a predisposition to be affected intellectually and emotionally by certain aspects over others, because of his (or her) acquired body of wisdom with which he attempts to understand the world. Reality might impinge in a surprising way, jolting complacency, or alternatively, emotional and intellectual detachment from the exotic may remain intact. Either way, when the observer comes to describe the scene, his only recourse is to metaphor drawn from his culture in order to create a sense of familiarity with the strange. Through metaphor and allegory, the observer tries to understand the scene and to convey it to others by making it seem familiar to them too.

While we know that this is what happens, only rarely is the process exposed in any clear way. A set of naturalistic sketches by a young artist, Richard Atherton Ffarington, are excellent examples of the work of an observer, his first visions. His later paintings of the same scenes bear all the hallmarks of someone casting around in his own culture for suitable ways of describing his experiences to others, in effect, of communicating. In comparing the two sets of works, the process of interpretation is exposed. Ffarington's work is also set in the wider context of other works of the day on the same subject, to expose more clearly how dispositions are shaped, and views directed, by categories of thought which are a part of the culture of the viewer.

Introduction

Between 1943 and 1947 Ffarington made several fascinating pencil sketches of Aborigines of south-western Australia, engaged in various activities. He later developed these into a series of watercolours, and sent a folio containing both sketches and paintings to his relatives in England, probably in 1850. At least two of the landscape images were adapted by engravers working for *The London Illustrated News* between 1850 and 1875, while a set of 22 artworks survives as a folio collection now held by the Art Gallery of Western Australia.¹

This folio of Ffarington's is remarkable in two respects at least. First, it is one of the few bodies of work featuring south-western Australian Aborigines as the subjects and as

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¹ Ffarington's folio has been published by the Art Gallery of Western Australia and an exhibition held of his work. See Tilbrook 1986.

such it complements contemporaneously written accounts of their appearance, social interaction and land use.² Second, it is a particularly clear example of the process of cultural interpretation, where cultural understandings intervene to infuse a scene with meanings derived from other contexts in order to communicate to an audience.

South-west Australian Aborigines

Aborigines occupied the south-western corner of Australia relatively unhindered for at least 40,000 years before their way of life was irrevocably interrupted by European settlement and colonisation. People held individual and group rights to the resources of defined tracts of territory to which they were bound by ritual ties and practical usage, and were distinguished from their more distant neighbours by language and variations on local custom, plus their perceived right to occupy their lands in accordance with their religious lore. They shared with other Aboriginal societies from all over Australia an economy based on hunting and foraging, and themes for living drawn from a body of belief based on a creative period, the Dreaming. They were culturally distinct in certain beliefs and practices, such as the particular rules of kinship and the form of their initiation ceremonies, as well as linguistically, while remaining indistinguishably part of the whole. In outlook they were extremely localised, distinguishing between kin and allies and fearing their more distant neighbours with whom they interacted in ritual and warfare. These local divisions were marked by dialect, and emphasised by the infrequency and formality of contact between members.³

In 1826 a British garrison was established at King George's Sound, the furthestmost tip of the south, under Lieutenant Lockyer of the 57th Regiment, following several European visitations to the area including those of Baudin (French, 1801-1803), Flinders (English, 1801-1802), de Freycinet (French, 1818), Phillip Parker King (English, 1818-1822), de Bougainville and du Camper (French, 1825) and d'Urville (French, 1826) (see below for further mention). This presaged profound changes for the Aborigines of the entire south west, although initially, in the King George's Sound area, only the local land-holding groups were affected materially. The big change came in 1829 when the Swan River Colony was founded under Governor Stirling with a detachment of the 63rd Regiment, and boatloads of Europeans began arriving and usurping the land and its resources. This met with vigorous and violent Aboriginal resistance on a local basis, which was inevitably ineffective in stemming the tide.

By 1843 when Ffarington arrived in the south-west, European settlement had spread from the Swan River Colony in an arc encompassing Toodyay, York and Beverley in the east; and south to Leschenault on the Collie River, along the Vasse River, and inland from King George's Sound, with an overland route linking the latter to Fremantle Harbour on the mouth of the Swan River. The Aborigines persistently tried to continue their traditional lifestyle, but they faced ever-increasing food shortages and social disruption mirroring in most respects the experiences of their fellows in New South Wales. It was these people whom Ffarington sketched.

² For example, see Hallam and Tilbrook 1990; Green 1979; Hallam 1979; Tilbrook 1983. Extensive quotes could be cited to accompany all of Ffarington's works, describing appearance, artefact and activity of the Aborigines of south-western Australia. However for the present purposes, only one quote from Captain Ellis's journal has been cited - see below under discussion of 'Corroboree' by Ffarington.

³ See Hallam 1979; Tilbrook 1988; Hallam 1991; Tilbrook 1983.

Ffarington's works

Seven of Ffarington's pencil sketches match with seven watercolours, and in addition there are five watercolours without corresponding sketches (three featuring Aborigines, plus two landscapes), and two pencil sketches (of life aboard ship bound for India), plus an additional watercolour of Cleopatra after Guido Reni.

Ffarington's pencil sketches are naturalistic portrayals of what he observed: a couple returning from the hunt with a firebrand and a kangaroo; two figures at a grave site intent in solemn ritual; a man tensed and about to spear a fish from a thick branch overhanging a river or estuary; two men absorbed in handling a freshly speared emu; a small group sighting a kangaroo; a camping ground; and a man climbing a tree in search of possum, or honey. Interpretation is minimal, abstraction is hardly entered into, and atmosphere is captured and highlighted by the intense involvement of the observed in their tasks. The figures are portrayed as Ffarington saw them (as far as this can be said with certainty), with a strong sense of movement and deliberateness of purpose, and an absence of any self-consciousness or posturing. Attention to body decoration and draping, and head-dress, is subservient to a focus on the task at hand, the physical endeavour. The landscape settings are sensitively handled reflecting the native flora, with tell-tale signs of European presence in the chopped logs, constructed tracks and ships in the distance or on shore.

Ffarington's watercolours differ in a number of respects from his sketches. The figures become stylised, posed, unnatural and unrelaxed in posture and exaggerated in gesture; dress and decoration become a focus; and comparisons with other people in other parts of the world start to intrude as the artist embellishes his figures with drapery, decoration and gesture. Much attention is paid to composition and picturesque construction of the landscape which consequently loses something of its Australian feel while more closely resembling European foliage.

The lapse of time between when the sketches were first made, and the watercolours were finally executed, allowed Ffarington's sense of the emotional intensity of the scenes to become dissipated, while his intellectual ideas took over as the main communicative force. The tensions inherent in the actions of the participants become lost, as the artistic intention shifts from recording, to restating. The watercolours could do more to tell a story, once they were one step removed from direct experience. There was time to reflect (imperfectly) on detail as seen in body decoration and cladding, and scenery, and to stylise and dramatise gesture and action. The figures could become more than what they were, they could turn into archetypes and they could engage in generalised tasks rather than the specifics of the moment.

The net effect is a dual record of great interest: of ethnographic detail; and of the casting of a different way of life in one preferred manner, as an idealised representation drawn from Ffarington's own culture.

The artworks

A detailed description of all of Ffarington's artworks will not be given here, nor a full discussion of its ethnographic content relating this to what is known of the south-west Aboriginal way of life in that epoch, as this has been done elsewhere.⁴ Instead, a selection of his work will be discussed in order to illustrate the points discussed in this paper.

⁴ See Tilbrook 1986 for reproductions of the artwork (except 'Cleopatra') from Ffarington's folio, and description of the ethnographic content of his works. See Tilbrook 1988 for discussion of south-west Aboriginal society based upon historical documentation.

FFARINGTON'S EYE

Water colour

Pencil sketch

'Throwing a spear'

'Throwing a spear' (more aptly titled 'Family hunt'): the contrast between the sketch and the watercolour of the same subject highlights the intrusion of previously held notions about people from far reaches of the world and their ways. The naturalistic pencil sketch is of a small, rather relaxed group of four, one member of which is standing with arm raised, captured in the act of aiming his shipped spear at some distant and unsuspecting game.

The transformation which has taken place in the watercolour is impressive. The group has focussed into a family in which attention is on the standing figure of the man about to throw his spear, while a woman turns towards a child and points dramatically. The scene has become a timeless depiction of socialisation, in which the child is being taught about the provisions of nature and how to obtain them, by the vigorous action of the man and the gesture of the woman. There is also something of the glory of the hunt, or the nobility of the hunter, in this scene. The fur cloaks of the Aborigines have turned into fabric-like drapery, reminiscent of Indian or Maori clothing, and the woman's possum skin bag has become rectangular. The man wears elaborate face paint and headdress. The drama which is being played out is about the origins of human society as Europeans imagine it, where the environment is kind, food is abundant, and the nuclear family group is the basic institution of social life and the foundation stone of civilisation. This is a painting of the 'romantic savage', with strong 'noble' overtones, almost before any fall from grace, and it is revealing of the European notion of the origins of their own society.⁵

'Spearing an emu': Ethnographically, this is a most interesting sketch because it shows two men cooperating in the task of obtaining food, the game they sought, and the natural environment in which they hunted. It depicts hunting with spears as a male activity, and it shows something of the coverings men wore and how they suited these to the task at hand. The men are captured in the act of cutting up an emu which they have just speared. They are intent on their task and their preoccupation is expressed in the lines of their bodies. One has cast aside his cloak, and is working unencumbered. There are reeds growing in the foreground, indicating the swampy conditions which provided abundant food resources for south-western Aborigines in which emu, too, were critical in their diet in that era.

The presence of Europeans is hinted at by a large, sawn log. This also presages the enormous changes to the environment, and to Aboriginal social and cultural life, that the Europeans caused. Already, the Aboriginal actors are caught in a time warp created by the simultaneous existence of their traditional social life and the new order of colonial society, as they pursue their traditional hunting in an environment which is changing rapidly both in the resources it contains, and in appearance as the land is cleared.

The watercolour sketch of this incident does not differ significantly from the pencil sketch, as far as ethnographic detail is concerned. Compositionally, many changes have taken place. An additional (third) figure has been added, resting with his foot on the sawn stump of a large tree. The actors are more stylised, wooden and staged, and they are wearing face paint and headdresses and staring into the distance rather than at the emu carcass. Nevertheless, the overall intention remains much the same, and no incongruity is suggested by the sawn tree stump, as men continue to live off the resources of a benign environment. The sawn timber was a constant feature of the military settlements where Ffarington was posted, and must have seemed as natural to him as the event of European settlement itself. The landscape has undergone considerable pictorial re-arrangement, losing its dense swampy characteristic and becoming almost park-like, with notably more formal trees in the middle ground.

⁵ See Smith 1989:330-331.

FFARINGTON'S EYE

Water colour

Pencil sketch

'Spearing an emu'

'Gravesite': This watercolour stands with 'Corroboree or native dance' (below) for its rarity value. In both pencil sketch and watercolour, many ethnographic details are apparent, such as the fires lit by the gravesite, and the weapons stuck upright in the freshly dug graves. The landscape retains its naturalistic character, with minimal compositional rearrangement. This could be a burial site, rather than an isolated grave. However, in the watercolour a strong sense of drama prevails. While drama was no doubt a feature of funerary rites, the sense of soft, human sadness is missing, which is so revealingly captured in the quietly standing and withdrawn, standing figure in the pencil sketch. In telling the story of the funeral and the intense emotions evoked, something of the human has been lost.

'Corroboree or native dance': No pencil sketch survives to partner this work. The ethnographic content of Ffarington's painting becomes more apparent when it is matched with descriptive accounts of the day. This watercolour is remarkable in that it is the only known visual record of south-west Aboriginal dance, and it accords extremely well with written descriptions of this, as well as with visual records from the eastern states of Australia.⁶

The following account of a corroboree by another military man, Captain T.T. Ellis, in 1833, serves to illustrate this point:

In the evening a Corroboree was given in compliment to the visitor. This Corroboree was extremely well got up, the spectators being seated in a semi-circle with a number of small fires in front resembling the stage lights in a theatre. It was the first at which I have seen a woman perform. Gibban's wife advanced reciting and waving her arms as if to excite the performers, who came forward in a band of eighteen young men with spears poised, they danced forward and formed a circle then a line and after a number of manoeuvres retired out of sight until the next act. During the interval a man sang remarkably well and accompanied himself with a Callee (throwing stick) struck against a Meero (shield) so as to produce the effect of Castanets. The same air, correct to a note, was answered by the band behind the scenes first faintly and then increasingly as they advanced to the state or foreground. They have regular airs, and persons noted as good singers, one of them sung the air I heard at the Corroboree and repeated it until I was enabled to write it down.⁷

This watercolour shows the line of dancers, with elaborate body paint and head-dress, the lead performer highlighted by the light from the small fires and additionally adorned with feathers or wood shavings attached to his hair. The Aboriginal onlookers are depicted around the perimeter of the dance ground, and once again the European presence is indicated by the sawn logs in the foreground. In this watercolour the sense of drama is strong, matching the stylised nature of the staged event itself. For once, European interpretation matched with the observation of Aboriginal interpretive intent. This, of itself, is strong testimony indeed to the communicative success of formal Aboriginal performance.

Biographical outline

Who was the man Ffarington, responsible for this record, and what influences might have been at work upon him?

⁶ For example, works by J.S. Prout, Henry Darcy and H. Glover, reproduced in Wild 1987, as well as Joseph Lycett reproduced in Smith 1989:237, plate 149 and Hoorn 1990, plate 13 (see below) and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur (1803) in Eisler and Smith 1988, cat. 218.

⁷ Ellis, T.T. Colonial Secretary's Office - Inwards Correspondence, vol. 29, 1833:157-159.

FFARINGTON'S EYE

Water colour.

Pencil sketch.

'Gravesite'

Corroboree or Native Dance.

Ffarington (1823-1855) arrived in Sydney, New South Wales, with the 51st Regiment of Foot (South West Yorkshire) aboard the 'Somersetshire' in 1841, aged 18. He sent a sketchbook home entitled 'From Australia 1841' containing eight pencil drawings of scenes made during his journey to the colony. Two years later, in 1843, he returned to London aboard the 'Trusty', purchased a commission of Lieutenant and set sail for Western Australia via Launceston, Tasmania, aboard the 'Champion' with his wife Ellen Julia Rowes. He served as Ensign with the 51st Regiment which had stations at King George's Sound, Kojonup, Bunbury, Williams, Leschenault, Pinjarra and Rottnest Island. He remained in Western Australia for four years and was granted four Perth suburban lots in 1845. He left aboard the 'Java' for Calcutta, the military headquarters of the 51st Regiment, in 1847. There is no record of any return visit to Western Australia between 1847 and 1855 when he died in Salford Barracks, Lancashire and was buried on the Isle of Wight. He was then only 32 years old. There is some disparity with the date of his death⁸ which might be a confusion with a later husband of his widow, for he is listed as dying in 1870 and having five children in addition to the first three born between 1843 and 1847.

Ffarington was the grand-nephew of Joseph Farington (1747-1821), topographic draughtsman and watercolourist,⁹ and seems to have shared with him a keen interest in observation and recording. Any influence his grand-uncle might have had on his interest in art is conjectural. Ffarington observes several artistic conventions in his works which display a repertoire of forms and theoretical concepts to construct picturesque compositions, emphasising the 'Claudian' formula using repoussoirs¹⁰ which suggests exposure to artistic circles, and it is likely that his grand-uncle was directly or indirectly influential in stimulating his interest in drawing and watercolouring. Neither is anything known about Ffarington's preference for spelling his name with a double 'f', making it easily misread as 'Harrington' in handwritten historical documents.

It is obvious from his work that Ffarington had at least a modicum of artistic training whether formal or otherwise, together with a strong interest in art and an amount of artistic talent. He was presumably not rich or he would not have had to work to earn his commission, and had he been of greater financial means his career might have followed an artistic rather than military pathway, and endured longer.

The historical context

The sense of otherness wrought upon European consciousness as a direct consequence of their foraying to the far corners of the earth over the preceding three and a half centuries, was founded in the European cultural tendency to reflect upon their own state of existence when confronted by contrasts. Interpretations were made through a web of European political, economic, social and cultural conditions that profoundly affected the descriptions of the encountered.¹¹ From Pigafetta (and Magellan) and Columbus onwards, accounts of observations and experiences of distant people and places were coloured by imagination, and with the intervention of time, romanticised versions emerged which retained certain identifying characteristics and changed or added others to suit taste and belief.

⁸ See Erickson 1979:vol.3.

⁹ See Tilbrook 1986:5 'View up the river from Millbank, 1793', coloured aquatint by J.C. Stadler after Joseph Farington.

¹⁰ Garry Dufour, *Introduction*, p.4-5 in Tilbrook 1986.

¹¹ See Eisler 1988:15; Hale 1967:333-343.

Eighteenth century Enlightenment ideas about the nature of native people intertwined with the stress on observing them as part of the scientific approach of the nineteenth century. The French expedition in 1801-1803 to chart the coast of Australia under Baudin, was guided in this task by a manual prepared by Joseph-Marie Dégerando,¹² as well as by artists including Nicholas-Martin Petit and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur (1788-1846) and a bevy of scientists. The English survey expedition under Matthew Flinders had aboard a naturalist and the painter William Westall (1781-1850),¹³ in the tradition followed by the English and Dutch explorers to the southern hemisphere, and before them the Portuguese and Spanish.¹⁴

Ffarington was exposed directly or indirectly to a body of artistic tradition, and to the contemporary art of his day. This included formal European classical and neo-classical artistic conventions, as well as the observational style of art of the colonial era which emphasised an accurate representation of nature and the depiction of typical elements to illustrate the characteristics of foreign lands.¹⁵ He was no great artist, lacking the time and opportunity, and possibly also the inclination, to develop his natural talent. It matters little that he was an amateur, earning his crust by other means than the sale of his art, for he was nevertheless applying observational skills within the context of a tradition to make an interpretation which he hoped to communicate visually to others.

The eye available to Ffarington

Precedents found in the work of other artists who painted Aborigines, may have influenced Ffarington when he came to do his own sketches. This included details of Aboriginal appearance and artefacts produced by professional artists such as Nicholas-Martin Petit and William Westall, and later de Sainson (aboard the Dumont d'Urville expedition of 1826-1829).¹⁶ However, he was interested primarily in action, what the Aborigines did rather than their portraits, and a number of artists had already depicted Aboriginal scenes, some in published form, in the half-century since the time of the Port Jackson Painter of Botany Bay circa 1788.¹⁷ The latter painted a number of Aboriginal subjects in a sympathetic, naive style revealing curiosity, humour, lyricism and keen observation. Among his works are paintings of Aborigines engrossed in their own activities such as cooking fish and canoeing, and in interaction (violently) with the settlers spearing a rushcutter.¹⁸

¹² Dégerando 1969.

¹³ See Eisler and Smith 1988, cat. 221 and cat. 220 for examples of Aboriginal portraits by Petit and Lesueur; see Chapman 1979, fig.7 for William Westall's sketch of an Aborigine of King George's Sound, 1801-2.

¹⁴ Eisler 1988:14-34.

¹⁵ Smith 1989:4.

¹⁶ See for example hand coloured lithograph after Louis Auguste de Sainson, *Porte du Roi Georges*, 1833, Art Gallery of Western Australia 978/Q124, reproduced in Chapman, 1979: fig. 18-25; Tilbrook 1986:12.

¹⁷ Smith 1989:159-162 and 374 (footnote 6) suggests that the Port Jackson Painter was Henry Brewer (1745-1796), clerk to Governor Phillip.

¹⁸ The rushcutter was almost certainly being speared for disrupting an important food resource to which he had no rights in Aboriginal terms, possibly nesting birds, in addition to any other reason.

David Collins published *An account of the English colony in New South Wales, from its first settlement, in January 1788, to August 1801: with remarks on the dispositions, customs, manners &c. of the native inhabitants of the country* (vol.2), in London in 1802 with eight engravings illustrating Aboriginal life by James Powell taken from drawings by William Alexander or, most probably, convict artist Thomas Watling (1762-c.1810).¹⁹ The Aborigines are shown engaged in various activities such as tooth evulsion, and are the result of direct observation and intended as ethnographical record. Watling painted many landscapes between 1798 and 1802 in which he characteristically included a group of Aborigines in the foreground in order to take the scene appear typically Australian, and also to render it more picturesque.²⁰ This artistic device was widely employed by other artists, relegating Aborigines, flora and fauna to the perimeters of views of European settlement, dominance and cultivation of the land.²¹ Ffarington's work bears a certain compositional resemblance to these works, and if he did see the Collins volume it might have stimulated his interest in the Australian Aborigines.

A much more likely influence is *Field sports ... of the native inhabitants of New South Wales* published by John Heaveside Clark in London in 1813. Clark worked from sketches done by others, without any first-hand Australian experience of his own, depicting Aborigines as noble and savage sportsmen while making allusion to the European sportsman and praising game and bird hunting as activities of the upper class.²² Ffarington might have viewed, and been boyishly intrigued by, these scenes of action as he probably shared Clark's interest in physical or 'sporting' activities prior to his military enlistment. He drew and painted many of the same subjects as Clark, although not too much should be made of this as certain novel scenes (to European eyes), such as of Aborigines climbing trees, were favourites with many artists. Clark's figures affect classic poses in highly romanticised and formally constructed compositions, of which Ffarington's watercolours but not his pencil sketches are slightly reminiscent.

Another painter whose works Ffarington might have seen was Joseph Lycett (1766-c.1825) who produced several landscapes, published *Views in Australia or New South Wales and van Diemen's Land delineated* in London between 1824 and 1825, plus a folio of Aboriginal works intended for publication in England but never published.²³ Lycett was transported to New South Wales for forgery in 1814, granted ticket-of-leave and employed in the Police Department, re-convicted of forgery and sent to Newcastle prison 1815-1817 where he worked for the regional commandant Wallis, and between 1819 and 1822 is listed in the colonial muster, Sydney, as an artist. In 1821 Wallis published his *Historical account of New South Wales* containing engravings by a convict, Preston, most likely from

¹⁹ Smith 1989:187 attributes the artwork to Thomas Watling, and the cover of vol. 2 to William Alexander working from a sketch by Watling. See also Hoorn 1990:13 (footnote 29) who attributes the artwork to Alexander working from Watling's sketches.

²⁰ Smith 1989:184; also see McCormick 1987, plates 19, 20, 27 for characteristic examples of Westall's landscape device.

²¹ For example see McCormick 1987: plate 35 'View of Sydney cove 1793' attributed to Captain John Hunter (1728-1793); plate 58 'Port Jackson 1804' by William W. Estall; plate 75 'Sydney from the west side of the cove, 1802' attributed to G.W. Evans; plate 81 'View of part of Sydney, 1804' by John Eyre (1771-?); plate 109 'South-west view of the town of Sydney in New South Wales A.D. 1810' by George William Evans.

²² Urry 1985:51-67 and especially p.58.

²³ See Hoorn 1990; McDonald and Pearce 1988:139-140.

drawings made by Lycett, including several Aboriginal figures and a corroboree (also the subject of both an oil painting by Lycett, and one of his folio watercolours).²⁴

It is likely that Lycett's Aboriginal folio was known privately in artistic circles and the young Ffarington might have been aware of it. It contains 20 watercolours of groups of Aborigines engaged in various activities, set in a naturalistic Australian environment with a strong eye to composition. Lycett executes the figures in naive style, and generally observes the convention of clothing them in shorts or loincloths. The paintings have a strong ethnographic content, echoing Clark (whose work Lycett might have been aware of) in topic but not style, as a reflection of what Lycett imagined would interest the buying public. The informative intent results in a move towards the typical ethnographic scene paralleling the typical landscape as Lycett composed his picture to include a variety of associated activities illustrating various facets of Aboriginal life.²⁵ This is most clearly seen in 'Aborigines spearing fish, others diving for crayfish; a party seated beside a fire cooking fish' where Aborigines are shown doing four sorts of fishing, cooking fish, socialising in a domestic scene and as a party keeping a look-out on top of a cliff.²⁶

Lycett's treatment reveals curiosity and acceptance of his subject matter but with a detachment which suggests little sympathy, and in his naive style he exhibits none of the good-natured and quizzical humour of his predecessor The Port Jackson Painter.

Augustus Earle (1793-1838) was in Sydney and the Illawarra, New South Wales, between 1825 and 1828. He painted several landscapes in which he took an empirical approach rather than composing typical views. He also did several portraits of Aborigines and Aboriginal scenes documenting their degradation by depicting the destructive effects of European settlement on Aboriginal culture and individuals.²⁷ Ffarington's emphasis is different in that, while he documents a European presence, his work is absent of a commentary which may not have occurred to him to make. His approach of landscape has much in common with Earle although the latter was much more skilled as an artist, and both are of a similar age when producing their Australian work.

Another view of Australian Aborigines which Ffarington may have been aware of, although his perception and work give no hint of this, was the uncomplimentary common caricature. This view depicted Aborigines engrossed in their own interaction, suffering the devastating effects of grog and physical exploitation, comic and hopeless. One example which epitomises this is the glaze on porcelain 'View of the town of Sydney in New South Wales, 1812-1814'.²⁸

The importance of direct observation

Ffarington stands apart from Clark, but alongside The Port Jackson Painter and Lycett (and also Earle) in one important respect: he worked from his own, personal, direct observations of Aborigines going about their mundane tasks. Because of this, the transformation made in seeking to present images of Aborigines to a viewing public is unwittingly exposed in Ffarington's work when his pencil sketches are compared with the later paintings of the same subjects. The contrasts between his pencil sketches, done 'on the spot' as an impartial observer, and his composed watercolour paintings completed some

24 See Smith 1989:236-238.

25 Reproduced in Hoorn 1990.

26 Hoorn 1990: plate 14.

27 See Hackforth-Jones 1980:25.

28 McCormick 1987: plate 146.

time later working from these original drawings, are singularly illuminating of how culturally based ideas are intruded between observation and description. Through this process, description becomes a combination of what is directly observed, and the ideas and knowledge already held about the subject, regardless of the extent to which the two actually correspond.

Clark, in contrast, was removed from the immediacy of contact with Aborigines, and relied solely on the descriptions of others, reconstructing his paintings from these. His work is inspired by the enthusiastic descriptions of other fellow Europeans of what they had seen, together with his (or his publisher's) enthusiasm for the classical ideals of physical prowess and sport, but it is not stimulated by any direct personal experience gained outside his own culture. Collins, on the other hand, did have the opportunity of first hand observation even though he did not do the artwork in his publication, and this undoubtedly influenced his direction of Watling's interpretation of the scenes they witnessed together as Watling is much less sympathetic in his artistic treatment of Aborigines on other occasions.²⁹

The spectre of the 'romantic savage'

Ffarington had an audience to consider in communicating about the Australian Aborigines, restricted to family and friends, although he might have intended it ultimately to include a book-buying public (or a newspaper readership). In portraying scenes to which his viewing audience could relate, he had at his disposal the contemporary stereotypes of Aborigines and their lifestyles. These were drawn in part from all the colonised countries including North America, India and Africa. Inevitably, Ffarington's figures became symbols for a category, the encountered and colonised 'other'.

The metaphor employed is that of 'romantic savage',³⁰ head held high, elongated limbs, cloak more cape- or jacket-like, as Ffarington casts around for things in his own culture with which he can compare the Australian Aborigines. In this way they can be made to seem familiar and hence intellectually understandable to himself and others, without fear of emotional involvement in their way of life or circumstances because they are also depicted as 'other'. Characteristics such as love of personal freedom, courage, great emotional depth, devotion to race and generosity³¹ are strongly suggested by posture and gesture, augmented by ornament, in most of Ffarington's watercolours.

It is not surprising that this romantic image appealed to Ffarington, the young man of action, for its stress on physical prowess and independence. Moreover, apart from Clark's neo-classical figures other illustrations were also available which depicted Australian Aborigines in noble and romantic vein and which he might have been aware of, such as the book by Captain Arthur Phillip, first Governor of Botany Bay, *The voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, published in 1789 with engravings of Aborigines by T. Medland from drawings by Robert Cleveley; or the journals of Captain John Hunter, second Governor of New South Wales who in 1793 published his *Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island* with a frontpiece by William Blake of a New South Wales family, from a drawing attributed to P.G. King, the colony's third Governor.³²

²⁹ See Smith 1989:187; also page 181 for an indication of Watling's cynical approach of Australia, perhaps founded in his own unfortunate experiences of transportation.

³⁰ See Smith 1989:326-332 for a discussion on the supplanting of the romantic savage for the noble in nineteenth century European thought.

³¹ Smith 1989:326.

³² See Smith 1989:172, plates 114 and 115.

One indication of Ffarington's attitude is hinted by the cloaks in which he drapes his figures. It is hard to discount the likelihood that Ffarington was influenced by the 'noble' and 'romantic savage' depictions of New Zealand natives. As pointed out by Eisler³³ the New Zealand natives were admired by the colonists for their agriculture and their warlike disposition, and from Tasman's (c.1642-1643) grim men, to Dalrymples' (c.1767) 'noble savages' and Sydney Parkinsons naturalistic studies c.1769, images of them over 126 years exhibit the enduring common element of the cloak worn clasped across the chest.

A post-script

It is unfortunate that Ffarington died at the tender age of 32, like Captain Collet Barker who was in command of the garrison at King George's Sound for 15 months from 1829 until he was fatally speared in South Australia.³⁴ The record of the south-western Aborigines could have been more complete and, possibly, more balanced, had these sensitive young men lived longer. Instead, verbal and visual views of the Aborigines grew increasingly harsh and intolerant, as is illustrated by the work of James Walsh (1833-?),³⁵ another young man in his late twenties. With the exception of Earle, the artists were all mature men and, presumably, while innovative they were less at the spearhead of change. The Port Jackson Painter was probably in his mid-forties at least, Watling was in his late thirties or early forties, Lycett was in his mid- to late forties, and Clark judging by his style and publication was a mature man.

Walsh was active in England in the 1860s and was transported to Western Australia for forgery in 1852 and re-convicted in 1859, also for forgery, and was listed as a clerk and painter following his release and pardon in the early 1860s (thereby bearing a similarity of career to that of Lycett). He produced a series of watercolours of crudely executed caricature-like Aboriginal figures, depicting them as primitive savages further demoralised by the effects of alcohol and a poverty-stricken existence. Far from the humour and sympathetic tolerance of The Port Jackson Painter, Walsh exhibits none of the detached acceptance of Lycett, but actively seeks a reaction in his audience of revolt and disgust at the scenes of violence and savagery. These strongly border on the comic, furthering the sense of distance between viewer and viewed.

Conclusion

Thus, the comparison of Ffarington's sketches and paintings shows the transformation which has taken place between observation and communication. Comparisons with the treatment of the same subjects by other artists of the day show the influence of current ideas on their 'eye'. This highlights the influence of established notions about the nature of reality, on the communication of information about that reality, and on the consequent understandings of what is to be believed. A reality is constructed which contains elements of the observed, thus conveying some sense of the exotic, but this is made familiar and understandable by metaphor and allusion to other times and places. In this process, the observed becomes distorted, but the description becomes real and, because of the meanings it has acquired from the culture of the observer, comes to contain guidelines for future interaction with that reality.

³³ Eisler 1988:30, see fig. 13 done in 1642-1643, fig. 12 done in 1767, and Parkinson's study done c.1769; for example see Smith 1989:29, plate 13.

³⁴ Barker kept a journal containing descriptions of the Aborigines of the King George's Sound region, see Green 1989.

³⁵ See Erickson 1979:vol.2, also Tilbrook 1986:14-15; Chapman 1979:cat.130-142.

FFARINGTON'S EYE

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