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## Distances Real and Imagined: George Augustus Robinson and the Gardens of Van Diemen's Land 1829-34

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**DISTANCES REAL AND IMAGINED:  
GEORGE AUGUSTUS ROBINSON AND THE GARDENS  
OF VAN DIEMEN'S LAND 1829-34**

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In this paper, I am going to explore just how wide the gulf was between the world of the first Tasmanians and the beliefs and perceptions of the man who was one of the very few Europeans who was interested enough to leave a detailed, although often blind, record of this ancient world. I am also going to explore the idea of 'garden', particularly Indigenous gardens, referencing a range of ideas and using my own experience and garden in the Perth Hills as points of understanding and departure. The paper will investigate the fundamental proposition that the island worlds of Indigenous Van Diemen's Land are more clearly understood if seen as a patchwork of ancient gardens and thereby will explore the hidden gulf between the world of Robinson's perceptions and that of the people he met and traveled with and eventually exiled from their worlds



*Image #1. titled Robinson a.newcombe 2011*

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32

George Augustus Robinson was a ‘civilised’ 19<sup>th</sup> century fundamental Christian Englishman. He was an alien intruder, a person of urban industrial culture and experience, coming from where industry and large-scale agriculture were disengaging vast numbers of country people from their self-contained village environments, cultures and homes and in the process their mythologies and sense of place. He was a man of urban, logical, legalistic, fundamentalist protestant Christian belief and perception. The place, land, culture and world he walked through were as remote in time, place and culture to him as could possibly be imagined within the human experience.

Robinson, the enigmatic and often derided chronicler of the surviving Indigenous society of Van Diemen’s Land, witnessed the last flickering moments of a truly ancient society and the fatal effects of a colonial holocaust. He left a remarkable record of what he saw and experienced in his journals, which came to be known as the *Friendly Mission* journals. (Plomley, ed., 2008) This human-made tragedy has been repeated throughout history whenever a settled society explodes onto a mobile Indigenous society (Cocker, 1998). Indeed it is occurring to this day across the globe. It is caused by the combined violence and disruption of colonial settlement and the insidious and deadly diseases of the invading world. In an article titled *Rumbles in the Paraguayan Jungle*, Ben MacIntyre reported in January of this year, on the possible effects on Indigenous Indians by a scientific expedition into the Paraguayan jungle:

Claims the expedition would amount to “genocide” are extreme, but the defenders of the Ayoreo have a point: the intrusion of the outside world, however well intentioned, has brought for the forest dwellers nothing but exploitation and destruction, beginning with Grubb. (The Australian Newspaper 1/1/11.)



Image #2 titled *Populations: a.newcombe 2008*

Sadly, Robinson's own actions and carelessness contributed to the further suffering of the tragically few survivors of this shocking byproduct of colonial settlement; yet he was a lost man, unknowingly contributing to the almost total loss of one of the oldest continuous, most isolated societies in human history. This society had created an island-wide patchwork of bush gardens and parks over millennia, where they harvested and hunted in a constructed landscape of infinite beauty. Their parks and gardens were the band lands of the island of present day Tasmania.

We could never do it (burn) with the same judgement and good effect as the natives, who keep the fire within due bounds, only burning those parts they wish when the scrub becomes too thick or when they have another object to gain by it -Lt. Henry Burbury. (Kohen 1995 p110.)

*On Bruny Island, Robinson 3 April 1829:* Traversed a vast extent of clear country interspersed with clumps or copses intended as cover for kangaroo, the whole range for miles forming a beautiful picturesque scenery. This has been done by the natives when burning the under-wood, they have beat out the fire in order to form these clumps. (Plomley p54.)

Robinson walked through the unrecognised gardens of Indigenous Van Diemen's Land between 1829 and 1834. These garden worlds had been in undisturbed existence for perhaps 8,000 years. The island of Tasmania may have been settled for almost 40,000 years but became entirely isolated as the Bassian Plain most recently submerged to form the present Bass Strait, around 8,000 years ago, cutting off any communication with the rest of humanity (McFarlane, 2008 p3.). When the British colonists first arrived in Van Diemen's Land, in 1803-4, they made first contact with people who were speaking perhaps some of the oldest unpolluted languages ever heard by an urban literate society. What the British did was invade an incredibly ancient relationship between humanity and a truly beautiful island.



Image #3, titled *Bush*: a.newcombe 2008

The colonists upset and very nearly destroyed a society so intimate and so long established within their very small garden worlds they left scallop shells far inland, next to watercourses to drink from.

*Robinson 29 April, 1829:* They have regular beaten paths, and a mutton fish shell at their watering places to drink out of. (Plomley, p.58)

Mutton fish is that very expensive Asian delicacy, the Tasmanian Abalone.

They lived in societies of sustainable competition. They had agreed territories; confined, perhaps ritualistic conflict; regional ways of doing things; local dialects and an intricate system of barter, negotiation and a communication infrastructure.

The boundaries of various hunting-grounds belonging to each tribe were respected and, as we shall see, trespass was equal to a declaration of war; (Ling Roth 1968, p.59)

Though they rarely remain two days in a place, they seldom travel far at a time. Each tribe keeps much to its own district. (Backhouse p.104) According to Walker each tribe confines itself generally to a district seldom exceeding twenty or thirty miles in its widest extent. (Ling Roth, p.105)

They treated their part of the island as a gardener would treat a garden, by constantly visiting and revisiting their land in a constant rotation of knowledge, ritual and engagement. They kept their hunting tools in bush cupboards, in the form of hollow tree trunks and used fire with consummate and uncanny skill.

*Robinson 10 November, 1831:* When it was found that I wished to have those firearms, the woman of the Big River Tribe confessed that they were not there now, that they had been subsequently removed and was concealed close by where we then was. MANNALARGENNA, Tom, UMARRAH and the other natives urged the woman to go and discover them and bring them to me. She at first appeared very reluctant, but they urged her to go and at last she consented. She and UMARRAH, who is her husband, set off together and I followed them. Proceeded about a quarter of a mile when the woman pointed out the place to UMARRAH where she said there were two guns concealed. At this place was concealed three fowling pieces and one musket, and a powder flask with some powder.

...She had previously near Eastern Marshes surrendered one fowling piece, one musket, forty five spears, five waddies and some bullets, slugs &c. (Plomley p. 511)

*WB Walker* At their place of rendezvous the natives keep a large stock of spears and waddies. The spears are carefully tied to straight trees with their points at some distance from the ground. (Ling Roth p. 69)

They communicated across vast tracts of the magical mountainous island via a well-defined system of foot paths running north–south across the haunting central highlands much as the Andean peoples traversed their mountainous lands and around the coast. They also visited many of the offshore islands in little more than bark rafts.



Image#4 titled *Watercraft*, manipulated digital image from original, C-A Lesueur, National Museum of Australia

They lived in a spiritual, perceptual, physical and mystical state quite unlike urban 19<sup>th</sup> century England. They moved through their land virtually naked and therefore exposed to the changeable and at times cold island climate. MANNALARGENNA, a wise and well respected elder and hunter, who stayed with Robinson and experienced and saw more heartbreak than any human being should in one lifetime, preferred to continue to feel the place around him rather than wear the perceptual/physical barrier of clothing. When in the bush or when meeting, often foreign bush survivors, the people with Robinson always went naked.

*On seeing bush people for the first time Robinson 16 March, 1830:* Sent four of my natives after them, and after observing for some time the movements of the natives, they stripped themselves of their European clothing and went in quest of them. (Plomley p. 131)

*Robinson 27 April, 1832:* The old king or chief MANNALARGENNA accompanied me on this occasion. He wore no clothes and the other natives had come without their blankets. (Plomley p. 600)

As a 21<sup>st</sup> century urban human, walking naked anywhere is a confronting and exhilarating way to experience place, let alone to run and hunt through ancient bush or to dive into

turbulent and cold southern waters daily for food. French explorers expressed fascination and amazement at Tasmanian Aboriginal physicality.

*Peron, the French visitor of 1802 reported: We had hardly set foot ashore before two Aborigines showed themselves at the top of a hillock, precipitous almost to the top. At the sign of friendship, we made them, one of them threw himself, rather than descended, from the top of the rock and in a twinkling of an eye was in our midst (Ling Roth, 1899.)*

What did Robinson think the bush people on the hill were doing? According to voice communication experts, 45% of communication is bodily, 30% is vocal and only 25% is information. Just because Europeans couldn't see the pathways one must always remember that Indigenous people had been walking that place for millennia, every twig, flower, bird known. Every living thing imitated, played with, used. These people were so of their space they could disappear in a blink of an eye

A shooting party approached a native camp near the Clyde, and found they had just abandoned their half-cooked opossums and their spears: excepting a small group of wattle bushes, at the distance of ten yards, the ground was free of all but lofty trees: the travellers immediately scoured this thicket, but on turning round they, in great astonishment, discovered that no traces of the aborigines were to be seen. (Ling Roth p. 15)

*Robinson 6 April, 1830: At 5am DRAY and the Port Davey natives went away, without giving me the intimation of what they intended. I woke when they decamped. A perfect stillness prevailed; not a voice was to be heard. (Plomley p. 145)*

Robinson noted warriors tightly tying bark around their upper arms and calves to improve speed and endurance (a method not unknown to modern sports physicians) and as with many other early chroniclers noted the women's remarkable diving and climbing abilities. John Glover, the colonial painter, captured incredible physicality in some of his painting of the last traditional dances performed on the mainland of Van Diemen's Land.



Image #5 from J Glover Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

Ling Roth reports of their extraordinary prowess in tracking, mimicry and camouflaging, he also details the difference in the actual movement and gait of the first people.

I remember a fellow of the Grimaldi breed: he undertook on a fine summer's evening, to place himself among the tree stumps of a field, so that not two of a large party should agree as to his identity. He reclined like a Roman on his elbow, projected his arm as if a small branch, and drew down his head. No one could tell which was the living stump, and were obliged to call him to come out and show himself. (Ling Roth p. 15)

They walk remarkably erect, assuming a dignified mien, and in all their movements exhibiting agility and ease. (Ling Roth p. 14)

George Augustus Robinson was first employed by the colonial government of Van Diemen's Land, in 1829, to act as a storekeeper on Bruny Island and hand out scarce and inappropriate government stores to the first people of the island. The Neone people, a people who had contact and intimate relationships with people across the mainland island of present day Tasmania, but who were dying in front of him, most probably from pneumonia. Tragically Robinson and the surviving Neone people with him either carried or encountered the disease right around the island over the next five years on what has come to be known as the *Friendly Missions 1829-1834*. Although unknown at the time what were referred to as catarrhal fevers and pulmonary complaints were most likely pneumonia.

After nine months of exploring the D'Entrecasteaux channel and Bruny Island, Robinson fabricated, what on historical evidence can only be classed as a lie, and blamed the peoples of the remote south-western quarter of Tasmania, for being responsible for the attacks and killings of settlers in the New Norfolk region north of Hobart. A difficult accusation to



believe, given the topography and distances involved, although Robinson sets up the lie in his journals and never corrected once he knew the impossibility of the accusation.

In the course of a conversation with one of the Aboriginal females respecting my intended expedition to Port Davey, I learnt to my greatest surprise that this very tribe has been above all others most active in the perpetration of those atrocities which have filled our newspaper columns and caused such a general consternation though out the settled districts of this colony. (Plomley p. 67)



Image #6 Titled *One of the mountain ranges between the south west and New Norfolk*. Pigenit, State Library of Tasmania.

Hobart was at the time being a small, rough, quaint, seagoing village and harbour and centre of the great southern ocean sealing and whaling industries. It was also becoming an important exporter of food and wool. The attack route would have taken weeks of arduous walking through ancient forests and mountain terrain for no apparent reason.

On the basis of this lie he convinced the colonial government to pay him to go exploring this region and meet and get to know the people living there. He leveraged this lie to make five remarkable journeys around the island between 1830 and 1834, where he indeed met with and got to witness the last flickering years of an ancient gardening and husbandry culture.

Unfortunately, he solved the intractable problem of pacifying the last fighting survivors of a brutal war of invasion. Because he travelled with first people, he travelled along their routes and pathways, he realized how few first people had survived the onslaught of diseases such as pneumonia and syphilis. The brutality and deprivations of the mad sealing gangs of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century preceded the dispossession and destruction of their gardens, by men of the book, law and the gun.

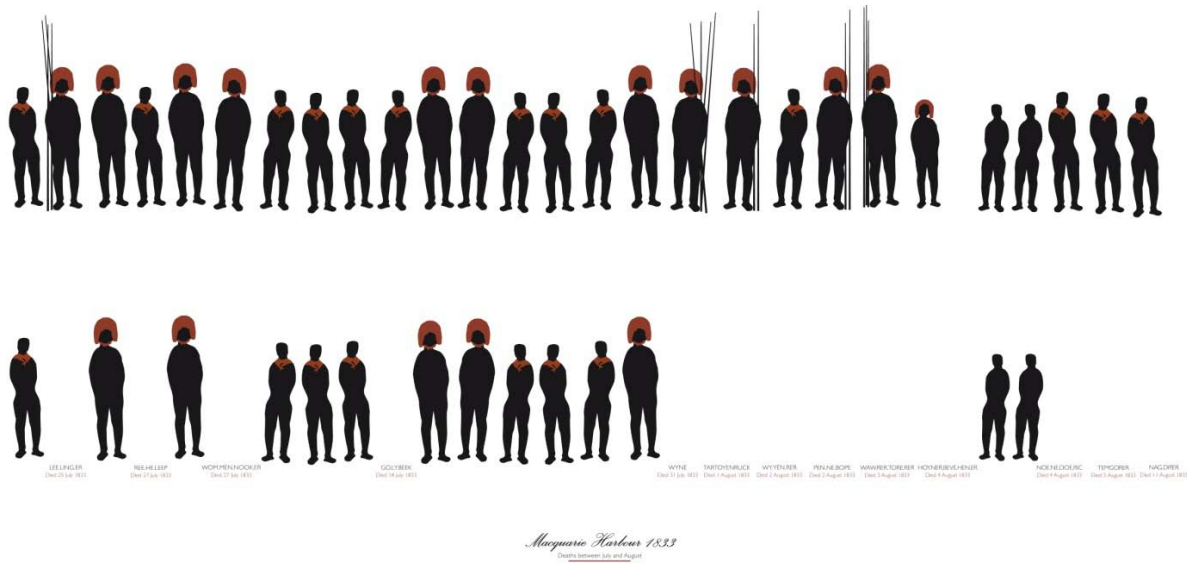


Image #7 Titled *Death at Macquarie Harbour 1833 a.newcombe 2008*

During his so called *Mission to Port Davey*, in the remote and isolated south west of the island, Robinson met people almost untouched by the blight of invasion. These people were harvesting in their own, isolated gardens. They had undetectable retreats in the bush and huts lined with feather down to keep out the howling, bitter winds of winter. The south-west of Tasmania is the first landfall across the raging, Great Southern Ocean since South America.

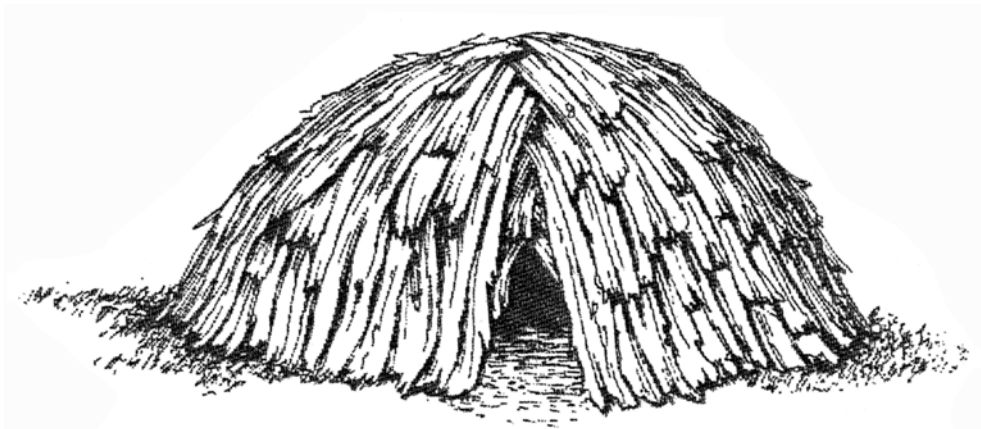


Image #8 Titled *Home*

The Inuit of the Arctic regions make igloos to keep out the raging wind. Tasmanian first people, across the coldest and windiest parts of the island made carefully constructed, down-lined igloos that lasted for forty years or more. They set hidden spikes along footpaths to skewer game and wound enemies. The women would dive naked, in the cold

and dangerous waters off the island's coastline harvesting a range of sea life including seals.

Another indication of the weight of time is to realise that in those, often cold, turbulent waters swam 16 kilo saltwater lobster the size of a 16 kilogram cat: a different delicacy to the 500 gram supermarket crayfish. These women also wove delicate, finely made baskets out of tough native grasses.

The depths of the remoteness between Robinson and his world and the worlds he walked through, almost without seeing is almost unimaginable. Yet occasionally one senses in his journals, in a picturesque sort of a way, Robinson gleaning a little of what was being shown him.

*Robinson after spending days observing the rituals of bush people harvesting. 24 March, 1830: Crawfish, the large whelk (LAY), mutton-fish &c are plentiful. The Port Davey natives seeing my natives (foreign Bruny Island people) thrust a mutton-fish into the fire to roast, was exceedingly angry with them and desired them to take it out again as it would make the rain come. The woman are great adepts in swimming. It surprised me to see them plunge into the heavy breakers among the rocks to dive for crawfish and mutton-fish. I observed them stand on the rocks in rather an obscene position and chant a song and then plunge into the water. (Plomley p. 135)*

*Robinson 25 March, 1830: This river is a rendezvous for the natives. It had a romantic appearance, with hills rising on each side covered with beautiful shrubs or variegated hue, between which the water was seen to meander on its way to the great ocean, the entrance of this river could not be discovered from the sea, as at the entrance it passes between two perpendicular cliffs covered with underwood. At this place the natives were enabled to obtain an abundant supply of the kangaroo-fig. To me it appeared a snug retreat- (Plomley p. 136)*

One of the most difficult areas for Christian non-first people to negotiate and understand is Indigenous spirituality and attachment to place. In Robinson's case he was absolutely hardwired not to see or understand this aspect of the life he saw and experienced around him due to his strongly held fundamental 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian belief system. He was also living in a colonial society fatally dismissive of any thoughts of the existence of Indigenous spirituality.

Yet all cultures infuse the natural world around them with narrative, life-forces and stories, meanings and otherworldly beings; gods and ghosts; fairies and nature spirits, sacred groves and magical sites. Place is much more than simply land. It encompasses human perception of life in all its many forms both physical and perceptual as well as the manifestations of the spiritual.

McGilchrist in his seminal book *The Master and His Emissary* talks about the difference between 'of this world' and 'about this world'. In this case he is talking about the perception and functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. He posits that when the right hemisphere is socially in the ascendant in terms of perceiving the world then the perceived

and the perceiver are one, when the opposite occurs then the perceived is separate; outside of is perceived as a construction. For example when a society functions using predominantly the right hemisphere, dancers, when they take on the guise of an animal, actually become that animal. The left hemisphere uses analogy, code, gesture, and language, which separates and removes the world (in this case the animal) to an abstraction and the dance becomes a sign. It is here that the idea of a world of gardens becomes problematic for the Indigenous/non-Indigenous discourse. This is true particularly when it concerns the Indigenous world view of the 'other' as opposed to the world view held within Christianity of an absence of the 'other', unless experienced through the prism of Christian dogma. In the Christian world, particularly within the broad church of Protestant Christianity, the 'other' has been banished to the world of childish imagination and entertainment.

The Christian world has many fault lines within its belief structure but perhaps the most damaging in relation to Indigenous and orthodox Christian understanding is the fault line between the utter belief and experience of first people in the 'other' and the total denial of the 'other' by the church itself even though religious visions, miracles, angels, devils, heaven and hell are believed. It is the 'other' that infuses the garden with narrative, meaning, life and being. Paradise in the Christian world is in the mental, improvable faith construct called heaven, not in the gardens of this world. Yet the book idea of paradise is 'Garden'.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> December 1484 Pope Innocent the 8<sup>th</sup> issued the Papal Bull *Summis Desiderantes*, calling on an inquisition. This was not the first time the Christian Church had declared war on heretics. They'd been in mortal combat with non-Christian beliefs since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but this inquisition was to be directed specifically against magicians and witches. Such people often had a deep understanding of the use of herbs and plant life. They harvested from the vast tracts of non-agricultural land, and grew and understood herbs and plants in gardens. Of course many other unfortunates were caught up in this madness; however the Bull had a virulent impact on those with nature knowledge.

Gardens were obviously dangerous places, awash with gods and creatures, nature spirits and pre-Christian beings. The church was re-iterating its first commandment- 'thou shalt worship no gods other than me'. A good example of the European world's loss and dismissal of the 'other' is the story of the Unicorn. Remember always that gods don't exist if no one believes in them.

The Unicorn is an animal narrative full of allegory and deep meaning. The medieval world truly believed that Unicorns to be real. Sadly in the context of this paper on loss and blindness, the Unicorn represents humanity's capacity for cruelty and our betrayal of purity and goodness. What is interesting today in light of the plight of rhinos and tigers, brought about by the belief in their medical properties, is that back in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, St Hildegard of Bingen believed in the medical properties of the unicorn's body parts, recommending that the ill should wear belts and shoes made from the unicorn's pelt and a crushed unicorn liver with egg would save you from the ravages of the plague (McLoad). The alicorn or unicorn horn was highly prized as protection against poisons.

The point being that the European world obviously has a rich, more often than not forgotten history in a belief of the 'other'. But with the fanatical and often murderous help of the established Christian church, we have made infantile, denigrated, sidelined and dismissed that held dear and central to the Indigenous world-view. We have also somewhat sneakily corralled the visualisation of the 'other' into the confines of gardens and parks, with sacred grottos, sculptures and places of quiet contemplation. Anybody who has watched an animal or a child, or has tended a garden or loved a place of childhood memory will understand the power of the 'other'. Unfortunately, in the Western cultural world this understanding is most often private and certainly derided by our left hemisphere dominated world of scientific 'truth'.

What is particularly interesting is that we have also created sacred and magical places for the 'other' to exist in, yet refuse to see or experience these places outside of the garden or park fence, out in the bush. But what if we understood the bush, the 'out-there' as a multitude of gardens? And here is the rub: Gardens, and I include parks in this, have always been analogous to ideas of paradise as places of the sacred. Places of beauty, the garden of life. So into this ancient world of gardens known as tribal or band lands stumbled Englishmen, hardwired not to see the garden for the wilderness. They were thinking always in terms of outside/inside, settled/wild, lost/home.

George Augustus Robinson is a classic case in point. Here was a 'civilised' man who was completely immersed in a 'civilised' fundamental Christian belief and religious system that not only dismissed, but also forbade any acceptance of the 'other' or the idea of the sacredness of place other than the site of a church. Incidentally this idea of 'civilisation' comes from the Latin root word *civilitas*- someone who lives in a city. A civilised society is one that lives in the city not a society of any particular value.

British protestant fundamentalism was forged in the fire of theological argument and brutality of both the European thirty-years war and the vicious English Civil war. The commandments of the Old Testament were taken very seriously as they are to this day. Many people have died defending their right to an interpretation of these commandments and the religious superstructures they underpin.

Looked at in the light of this deeply entrenched belief system based on commandments that advocate destroying the sacred places of others and to worship no other idea of God, except the Christian, it is frightening to realise just how blinded 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian colonists were to the 'other', as blind as American fundamental Christian missionaries are to the damage they perpetrate in South America today. It is little wonder Robinson acted in the way that he did. For example within three months of arriving on Bruny Island, Robinson had interrupted what must have been one of humanity's oldest funeral rituals and buried a man named Catherine on the 11<sup>th</sup> July 1829, instead of allowing a traditional funeral pyre to be lit (Plomley p. 66)

Robinson and his fellow colonists not only did not see the gardens they were in, they were forbidden by their religion to do so, although at times Robinson certainly felt the power of the

garden during his journeys. He termed these moments picturesque as a logical, formalistic way of framing the 'other' in Romantic ideals.

It is blindingly obvious that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people see the world quite differently, particularly if we accept that Christians have an often-unrecognised cultural and religious *fatwa* against acknowledging the 'other'. This leads to 'place' becoming 'land' or an artificial legal division of the physical plane, although mining rights makes only the earth's surface legal land. What exists on or below becomes something different. Land definitely does not include the other and does not include the life sustained on the surface or underneath this legal division of the planet, unless it is agricultural stock or crops. Who owns the worms and microbes, which breezily disregard the legal divisions of land or the passing birds and animals, plants and fungi?

Having said all this concerning the colonial blindness towards the spirits and actuality of the natural garden, I would like to offer a quote that hints at the ever-present sense that urban societies are not completely without acknowledgement of the power of the other. This quote was written after the French explorer, Admiral Bruny d'Entrecasteaux's watch crew made a near fatal mistake. They turned north too early, as they crossed the southern tip of Tasmania during their frightening lonely voyage across the Great Southern Ocean in 1792 and found themselves in the treacherous cross currents of the channel that now bears his name. After a day of difficult and dangerous sailing, d'Entrecasteaux and his two battered ships the *Esperance* and the *Recherché* finally came to anchor off Recherché Bay at the southern mouth of the d'Entrecasteaux Channel in the rendezvous lands of a number of ancient people.

*I shall now attempt the vain task of conveying the feeling I experienced at the sight of this solitary harbour, placed at the ends of the earth, and enclosed so perfectly that one could think of it as separated from the rest of the universe. Everything reflects the rustic estate of raw nature. Here one meets at every step, combined with beauties of nature left to itself, signs of its decay, trees of enormous height and corresponding width, without branches along the trunk, but crowned with foliage always green: some appear as old as the world; so interlaced and compacted as to be impenetrable, they support other trees equally large but dropping with age and fertilising the ground with debris reduced to rottenness. Nature in all its vigour, and at the same time wasting away, seems to offer the imagination something more imposing and more vivid than the sight of the same nature embellished by industry and by civilised man; wanting to conserve only the beauty, he has destroyed the charm; he has removed its unique character, that of being always ancient and always new.*

Bruny D'Entrecasteaux 1792.

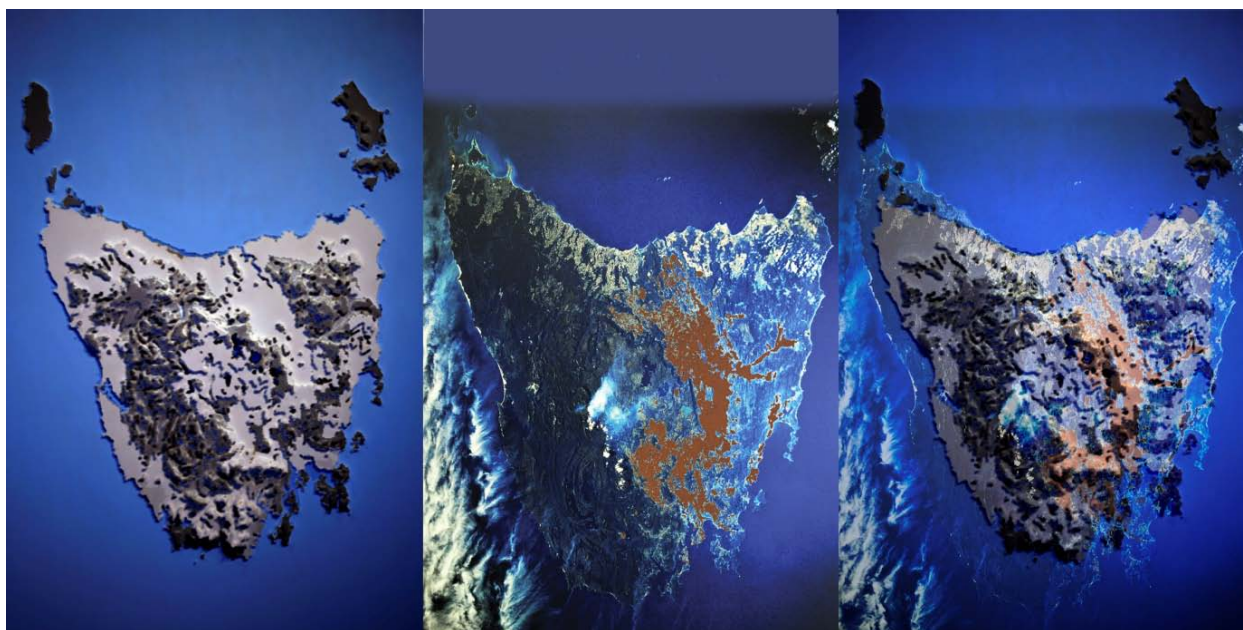


Image #9 titled *Natural places of habitation, a.newcombe 2011*

So what of this place, this country and the people whose world it was. If we look at a map we can see the natural communication pathways and habitation the land forces people to live in and travel through. A present day satellite image of Tasmania shows settlement patterns and agricultural activity little different from pre-settlement patterns. By the time George Augustus Robinson set out on his remarkable and tragic travels, the land west of Recherche Bay was home to some of the least disturbed first Tasmanian gardens. This is the truly sad aspect of Robinson's writing. He walked through many of the gardens of the first Tasmanians but he saw or met very few of the first gardeners. Indeed only 300 people made it alive to the Bass Strait Islands by 1836.

What was this world of gardens and why gardens? They were gardens because the people whose gardens they were knew exactly where their garden was no longer their garden. They were wild gardens of endless millennia in age.

They were nurturing homes for countless generations of people. Families lived and moved through these small gardens as clearly defined spaces (to indigenous people if not to the interlopers), which gave them food, medicine, spirituality and life itself. They used these spaces with knowledge, infused them with narrative and meaning, controlled them with language. In other words there was no wilderness or farm, only my land and not my land.

To cite Phillip Robinson in *The Faber Book of Gardens: All gardens have a boundary, a boundary, which defines a space, and that space we call 'garden'. The area beyond the 'fence' may, at first glance, be indistinguishable. Just being beyond makes it 'other'. There are profound psychological boundaries in the minds of the owners, as entire and impregnable, as the ground is open. Even non-existent gardens have fences: Poetic gardens are bound in stanzas and prose; written gardens in paragraphs and chapters. Gardens do not need to exist to be gardens. There*

*are gardens drawn on paper at the planning stage, captured in pictures, evoked in music, described in words. There are gardens of the mind.*' (Robinson ed. p XI)

I have created a native bush garden in the Perth hills where I live, complete with a multitude of life: bees, insects, bobtailed lizards, snakes and a plethora of birds including a troop of black cockatoos. They belong to my garden but they do not belong to me. The soil is thin and on ironstone. The summer scorches half the garden. Yet twice a year, as the garden has matured, the scraggly, tough Western Australian plants (grevillea, calistomen, eucalypts, wattles and the like) break into a riot of colour in the strangest most beautiful forms imaginable. Growing this three quarter acre garden has taught me much about an alien place: Western Australia, land of the Nyoongar people. Without the daily perambulations through my garden I would know nothing about this place—its climate, its soils its soul—in which I live.

Carol Yoon in her profoundly disturbing book *Naming Nature*, makes the worrying observation that suburban humanity, particularly in the western world, live virtually sealed off from the natural world through ignorance and disinterest. She uses the example of the children of the Tzeltal Mayans of Mexico who, by the age of four, can recognise and know the properties of over a hundred plants, while the average suburban adult can barely tell the difference between a shrub and a tree. She maintains that we have lost sight of our 'umwelt', our ability to negotiate, recognise and order the living world. She maintains that we have handed this responsibility over to science with all its inadequacies. McGilchrist, as I understand him, would posit this as the ascendant of the left hemisphere culturally over the functions and perceptions of the right.

This is just one of the profound changes going on in relation to the urbanisation of humanity. Our umwelt is becoming the left hemisphere world of the logical, constructed urban umwelt. Decontextualised and catalogued, we live in it, not of it. This process began in earnest during Robinson's lifetime.

I have a mental map of my Western Australian garden. I know every plant in this small, three quarters of an acre of land. I've watched flowering gums shoot from 200cm long sticks into beautiful four-metre high trees. I know where not to put my hands without announcing my presence. I know which grevillea will flower first. The act of gardening has given me deep knowledge about how a small piece of the world works, lives and exists.



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*Image #10 Garden, a.newcombe 2010*

But my garden is young. It is also of course constructed. It has an artificial watering system and I've constructed pathways through the space. But my pathways are simply raked natural pathways that lead into little pockets of indigenous plant life growing in mainly untouched ways.



*Image #11 Garden, a.newcombe 2010*

If my garden knowledge were to be extended 30 square kilometres around me and I and virtually everybody I knew were born in some part of this garden or connected to me by ancient pathways leading to and from my garden, then my knowledge of these thirty square

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47

kilometres would be the young knowledge similar to that of an ancient gardener. My whole life would have been spent observing and experiencing this small world. Indeed my knowledge would have been passed down to me over countless eons. Occasionally, I may travel beyond, for ceremony and meeting, but permission would have to be requested and given and more often than not the people asked would be related to me in some way and be speaking the same dialect or language. Even my expanded world becomes a patchwork of our gardens, their stories interwoven with mine and the histories and stories related. I would be totally of that space.

I also have a mental map of a remembered garden, an approximate 25 square kilometre garden, my childhood garden, my place-not-my-place. It consists of land I have walked on and continue to walk through and visit to this day. This garden is a construct of my mind it is made up in my imagination from memory and experience. I mentally drop into this place every day, but only physically visit it perhaps every three or four years as I have done my entire life. It runs from the eastern banks of the Mersey River in Tasmania, from the township of Latrobe to the mouth of the river at Devonport and then east along the seacoast to the Rubicon River at Port Sorrell. It then tracks inland from Panatana Creek, across country back to the township of Latrobe. What is really interesting is that the 20 to 25 square kilometres of my imaginary garden, matches what is believed to be, the most common extent of band or family territories in first Tasmanian societies. There is substantial evidence that these estimates are reasonably accurate (McFarlane p. 5) There is also a French naval topographic sketch which bears this estimate by showing an approximate 20 kilometre stretch of coast showing six Indigenous campfires suggesting a population dispersal of around perhaps forty to forty eight people per twenty kilometres.

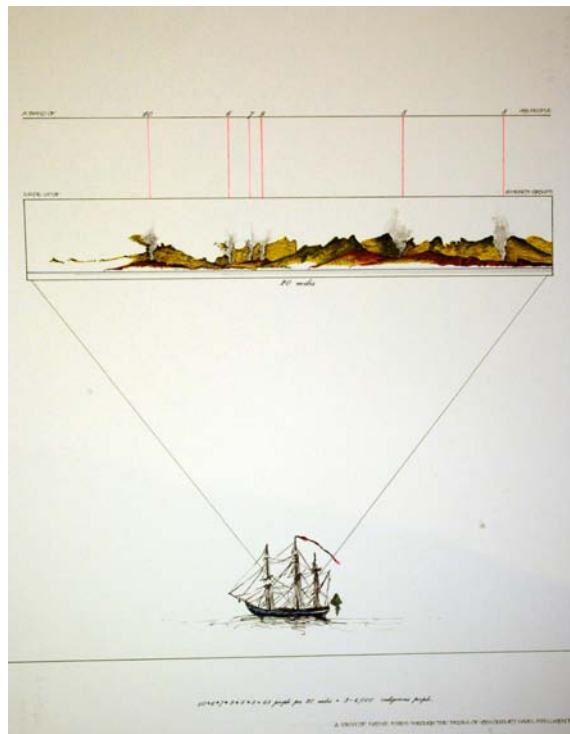


Image #12 French view of a band garden, a.newcombe 2008

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My childhood garden is clearly defined in my mind. Across the Mersey River west to the town of Devonport and the orchard centre of Spreyton is definitely not part of me. East across the Rubicon River to the Narawntapu National Park is not unknown, but certainly not part of who I am. These places across the rivers are more like a visited space than my space. Beyond the little town of Latrobe and indeed the township itself are also not part of my country. As Phillip Robinson in *The Faber Book of Gardens* writes, 'The area beyond the "fence" may, at first glance, be indistinguishable. Just being beyond makes it "other".' I cannot rationally explain why my garden begins and ends where it does but it absolutely does.

My garden of the mind has all the accretions and divisions of the modern age: roads, towns, fences, legal ownership of land. What it doesn't have is story other than the one in my mind. This is a story I do not regularly share and for many decades have not built on, other than the story of my infrequent visits. It has history but that is history of activity not a story of place. History in the Western sense is the telling of the activities of humans regardless of place. It is only recently that historians have come to understand the importance of local place in influencing action.

This modern land is also divided into many parts at many different levels. Fences define ownership. Lines on maps define arbitrary political/religious/social boundaries. Communication technologies connect this land with the rest of the planet instantaneously. Agricultural crops divide land use and towns remove their inhabitants from a sense of the garden. Strangers move daily through the space and change is constant, ever present and abrupt. Indeed the concept of a holistic garden has long disappeared. Much of my mental garden was once a continuous forest. Today it is rich agricultural land and urban space.

However, there is still a residue of how the whole garden might have functioned before the onslaught of white men. The township of Latrobe sits at the first safe crossing point of the fast flowing River Mersey almost 20 kilometres inland, so it is possible this area of the garden acted as a gateway and meeting point to the outside world, west along the coast. It was also a flood plain with an abundance of birdlife and wildlife.

The coast east between the mouth of the Mersey and the Rubicon Rivers is benign, flat and was reasonably clear of the forest so would have been an area of easy hunting and fishing. Today wombats and other wildlife flourish in remarkable numbers across the Rubicon River in the Narawntapu National Park. It is feasible to suggest that this was also the case before colonial settlement. The inland area of the garden would have been dense forest but what was found throughout the garden are flood plain and marsh stands of tea tree, the raw material for spear making. If the original owners had been tending and knowing this place from time immemorial with the intimate knowledge of a gardener, then this space would function as a whole. It would be bounded by natural story.

To give an insight into how blind the early nineteenth century agricultural colonialists were to the knowledge stories of these ancient gardens, I would like to give a simple example of the concept of numbers as found in nature from a discovery in my Perth garden. It was widely believed by colonialists that first Tasmanians could only count to five.

I was recently wandering through my garden. We had had rain and warmth and my garden was new. I was checking on new plantings so was moving through the perfumed pathways of un-sculptured native bushes. Smell is an often overlooked ingredient of our perceptual lives, as is taste. I was winnowing and tasting some of the native grasses I've planted.

On brushing passed an acacia tree, I noticed the seed pods which, when ready, go brown and sit, contrasted to the olive green of the tree. These seed pods have a life cycle of their own, independent of the trees. They turn light to dark brown as they mature and then, finally they open, revealing little black seeds. In wonder, I discovered that these little black seeds nestle in their pods in equal rows of three, along each side of the pod, like space explorers on a journey to the outer universe.

Now imagine if this simple little truth had been revealed to me as a child and a story had been constructed around the origin of this pod, its name, properties, smell, age and uses. Imagine if this little brown pod and its six seeds were used as phenomenological tools to teach the concept of mathematics. Ling Roth, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century archivist, published accounts of the generally held belief of the colonists that the first people of Tasmania could only count to five. But the concept of six lay in my hand.



*Image #13 Six, a.newcombe 2011*

It is quite possible that memory-enhancing devices, such as chanting the information or enacting it out in ceremony, dance, song or story form, were also used. This was an oral society with endless hours of time to sit and construct an economy of memory and knowledge. They had stories of the stars, the endless enourmousness of the Tasmania night sky. They told stories, hours in the telling and sang existence into being. There were no distractions. The family groups could move though their space with the knowledge and phenomenology of uninterrupted millennia.

Unfortunately, both the peoples and the places of this land were disappearing in front of Robinson's eyes. He was also a transient visitor. Gardens need constant attention and stability. It is completely wrong to think of Aboriginal movement as random and disconnected. It is much closer to reality by thinking of these movements as the slow circling of gardeners harvesting, collecting and hunting.

Their little family and band lands were linked gardens. Their perceptions over a twenty-mile radius and beyond were those of ancient gardeners. Robinson didn't realise that he was moving through endless, wild gardens. Families of women, unattached girls, young children and the elderly would all comfortably travel within the band's garden. Every tree known, every smell smelt, every animal footprint recognized and every nuance of nature noted and understood.

*Robinson 25 December 1830:* The Aborigines have considerable knowledge of the signs of the weather and had attained to such celebrity that my people, i.e. white men, would consult them on this subject, and always appeared satisfied at what the natives told them. If the clouds or scud fly swiftly along it is a sign, they say, there will be no rain; if a circle is round the moon it's a sure sign of bad weather, plenty of wind; if light clouds appear it is a sign of fine weather. Indeed they have numerous signs by which they judge and I have seldom found them to err. (Plomley p. 300)

The young warriors of course, did what young warriors do throughout history and indeed these guys were as close to the first warriors known in human history. They went out on risky adventures as told in KICK.ER.TER.POL.LER's tale of inter-district clan fighting (Plomley p. 257). The troubling part of the story is that it takes place in 1824-5, late into the early settlement period.

KICK.ER.TER.POL.LER, a respected warrior and hunter tells of an epic journey across what can be dangerous and raging seas, in flimsy rolls of bark held together somewhat like ancient Egyptian reed canoes, to meet up with some mates from two distant bands and then make, what must have been at least a two week journey from the east coast to the central highlands. He crossed a land of snap-blizzards, freezing lakes, rolling fogs and blissful sunsets to abduct and ceremonially join with women.

The first people's world was also profoundly different perceptually. They could see perhaps five times as far as settlers. They were fishing for saltwater lobster that can grow to 16 kilos in weight. Abalone also grew to perhaps twice the size of today's catch. The pathways of the first people were complex and intimately known. As gardeners slowly rotate through their gardens so do first people. They used fire in a very controlled way as gardeners do and fashioned their little worlds in ways we barely understand or acknowledge. The remnant pre-settlement places of Tasmania give slight memory of what was once here. To know land as intimately as a gardener gives rise to humanity's very spirituality, intellect and perception. This world was sustained and undisturbed for 15 thousand years and settled for perhaps 40 thousand years. It was almost completely destroyed within 30 years. No wonder Robinson didn't see what he was looking at and why

we, even today, struggle with understanding a true attachment to land, Romantic or otherwise.

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