John McPhee put John Glover in the picture, identifying him as the foreground figure with sketchbook sharing our view of the Tamar River at Launceston. David Hansen saw that Glover marked his Hobart Town house in special colour at the centre of a distant panorama of the town, the viewpoint for which is across the Derwent in a sportive scene of indigenous Tasmanians at Kangaroo Point. For that work, the artist’s point of view (and ours) doubles with that of the Tasmanians, and the artist, looking at the neat settlement under frowning Mt Wellington, sees himself in it. I like the verbal image, which joins the painter to the scholar in viewing a work and imagines the artist as one who searches for meaning. It may not correspond with the deep perspective of art history, however, and the authors of John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque have preferred to look back with hindsight. An intriguing aspect of this gentle, though magisterial, text is what the writers saw.

John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque has been six years in the making and is the authoritative product of five authors who shared documentation gathered by researchers working under the direction of Hansen, who is at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Forethought on this scale has temporarily vanished in art museums elsewhere; they could take note of the Glover project, which shows how things can be done for maximum authority. The book accompanies a major exhibition now touring Australia (it could have gone to the Tate, but funds fell short). Like many such catalogues-cum-monographs internationally, it is the last, best word on its subject, impressively large, and handsome to boot: marketing won’t be a problem.

In it we encounter a new art history, one that adheres more closely to works of art and curatorial research than the New Art History of the past twenty years, but which benefits considerably from the university scholar’s interest in concepts. Glover has been an ideal subject for such coordination, never before so thoroughly researched nor subjected to five strictly framed studies of his relevance within Australian and British history. The step is altogether the bravest in Australian art history for some time.

Leaving aside substantial differences for the moment, all writers saw a painter learning his trade in England at the tail end of the 1700s and who was therefore captive to the popular taste for the Picturesque. From the 1790s to the 1820s a cult of sensibility coloured English art, literature, theatre, architecture and tourism, and professional and amateur taste. So pervasive was this cult in the general perception of landscape that Glover would be in no position to see around it. The differences between the writers’ approaches relate to what the Picturesque represented historically: was it merely a passing phase in popular taste, or did it enforce an imperial view of the world of nature? Those are big questions, conceivable only because Glover’s world is remote from our own, at the expansionary other end of the British Empire.

Hansen, with engaging deftness, weaves the fruits of new research into Glover’s life and work, using the traditional explanatory mode by which art is assessed primarily in terms of an art-historical period. The Picturesque involved Glover in a set of aesthetic principles, based on the ‘best’ of past models, which were invoked in addressing real-life scenes. The first colonial picture that Hansen discusses was constructed to a trite formula. A shadowed foreground, curving steeply down from the sides, frames a distant view of Hobart and the Derwent. To even the least informed, Glover’s painting would reflect the exemplary in a scene of real nature. To the degree that it was unleavened by nature, the pictorial code was a set of recipes rather than a language rich in possibilities.

The style did lead to invention, however, and eventually to a dénouement almost the opposite of the founding aesthetic. One of the authors, conservator Erica Burgess, explains how the commitment to paint natural effects had practical results in patterned strokes, patented oil colours and so forth, devised to assist rapid transcription. By the 1820s Constable and Turner, contemporaries of Glover, were moving fast into the comparatively unfettered practice of empirical observation that was to become the major trend that century. If I have any criticism of Hansen’s interpretation of the Picturesque, it is that he passes over its changing aspect.

Painters remained captive to the poetry of the past to the extent that their subject was not scenery alone but figures-in-landscape: they were telling a story as well as transcribing a scene. Traditional ‘pastoral’, ‘arcadian’ and ‘banditti’ scenes, with figures dressed in appropriate historical garb, barely sustained translation into contemporary dress. The push to nature led to modern scenes (such as Glover’s convict shepherd) that no longer evoked an historical model, and to images that forced a specific issue between past and present (as with Glover’s Bath of Diana). The view of Hobart is illustrated with Glover’s early copy-drawing of Gaspard Dughet’s Abraham and Isaac, which has the same composition. For the Van Diemen’s Land picture, Glover replaced the small, burdened figures of Abraham and Isaac with two men toting guns, who likewise toil up the gully. Viewers were probably not expected to recognise a specific link with one of Gaspard’s paintings, but if Glover wanted to draw that parallel, he pointed to a story of potential human sacrifice in Van Diemen’s Land in 1831.

Besides the Picturesque aesthetic, there is another arm to Hansen’s method, the close research into objects. Glover looked from shaded Salvator Rosa’s Glen towards Hobart and...
the Derwent, and made two drawings, the first showing the merest composition outline, the second including details such as fallen trees and eucalypts furred with regrowth after a recent bushfire. Hansen chose not to construct a portrait of Glover from this kind of research (which would show the artist making choices), presumably because he felt a truer picture was to be found in the typical: Glover’s English contemporaries reported that he was conformist.

Ian McLean, on the other hand, is concerned to find a contextual basis for his thesis. Two historical claims have been made for Glover in Australia. In the first, he is the father of the representative gum tree and founder of a pastoral type of Australian landscape. But since the 1980s Tim Bonyhady, Nicholas Thomas and Ian McLean have argued that he wielded the aesthetic weapon of imperial propaganda, pushing the indigenous people and landscape back into a pre-colonial past, and foregrounding the European vision of a pastoral future. Working from the general to the particular, they sought contextual evidence that would support historical hindsight. McLean’s essay modifies several past attempts. My own research leads me to think the ‘course of empire’ thesis is a reasonable revision of history, supported by a general study of colonial art, whereas the attempt to fit the thesis to a single artist’s work is impracticable (no individual equates exactly to the average). According to the theory’s proponents, they had a case if the Picturesque typology could serve the cause of empire (it could), and if Glover’s paintings pushed the message (the evidence was not firm). Individually, they have suggested that Glover’s twenty-three images of indigenous Australians were set in a past before British settlement (but the paintings portrayed contemporary Aborigines, and some included the settlement), did not include park-like landscapes associated with the Picturesque pastoral (yet some do), or at least excluded the settlers’ farmlands (however, some of Glover’s titles specify settings at Glover’s, Wedge’s and Batman’s farms, and one scene includes farm buildings).

The problem in fitting theory to evidence lies, I think, with the assumption that an individual is the unwitting tool of historical forces. Presenting Glover as an empiricist (though working to recipe), McLean half-accedes to him the role he accords himself: ‘a modern man trying to understand his heritage and the history of the settlement.’ And Hansen, too, though working to recipe, concedes some ground to John Glover as an alchemist.

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