

THE TROUBLE WITH PARADISE

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Abstract

From the very beginnings of European encounter, there has been a perception, or a hope, that Tasmania might offer a new paradise. What was once ‘wilderness’ is today re-framed as ‘Eden’, where the travel-weary Westerner can purchase an opportunity to ‘return to nature’. However, the danger for Aborigines is that the authenticity of cultural tourism products is compromised, and Aborigines themselves are experiencing transformations in cultural identity.

This paper explores the European colonial tradition of a search for Paradise and its implications for the authenticity of cultural transformation. The author, a descendant of the Trawulwuy people of north-east Tasmania, offers a personal reflection on Aboriginal engagement with the Indigenous heritage of Tasmania, and the authentic expression and development of Indigenous identity, by suggesting that colonial traditions inherent in the search for Paradise are again at play in Tasmania through the development of Indigenous tourism products. The experience by Aborigines of contemporary tourism is considered with reference to the Biblical mythology of Eden and the expulsion of Man from the garden.

As Tasmania increasingly commits its development agenda to tourism, and visitors to the State progressively express an appetite for an authentic Indigenous cultural product, the potential for disappointment of customers—and further alienation of Aborigines from their land—increases.

It is easy to unconsciously transform the term ‘imaging’ nature to ‘imagining’ nature. Both words come via Middle English and Old French, and are likely to be from the Latin word *imitari*—to imitate. So imagining and imaging are common in etymology and not dissimilar in meaning. This transformation was easy for me, because the popular notion of nature has always seemed to be an imaginary construct that does not link up with the phenomenal reality of life, or the ontological setting for an Aboriginal person.

Although I have enjoyed a mainstream Tasmanian education and have a wealth of European ancestry, my identity since adolescence has always been dominated by my Indigenous heritage. This has engendered in me an enduring fascination with the relationship between past and present. In recent years my research has been around a variety of aspects of this matter. Specifically, how do we construct a mythology of the past and translate it into contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal culture and identity?

There are a series of images that can be seen to have strongly driven the development of Aboriginal identity over the past few decades. One of the most profound is *The River Nile*, a painting by John Glover. The image stirs in me what I suspect lies at the heart of my own sense of Indigenous identity. It is an image of how my ancestors once might have lived. It is an image, imagined by Glover, of Paradise lost. I find an intense engagement with this

imagined landscape in the possibility that one of the figures that Glover has sketched into the scene is likely to be an ancestor of mine.



Figure 1: John Glover (1837). *The River Nile, Van Dieman's Land, from Mr. Glover's Farm*. National Gallery of Victoria. Reproduced with permission. **AWAITING WRITTEN PERMISSION**

I have always loved the many rivers of north-east Tasmania, the homeland of my Aboriginal ancestors. Granite boulders are strewn along the rivers' course, warming in the sun to offset the often chill waters. The open, dry slopes are populated by *Callitris* and *Casuarina*. The banks of smooth river pebbles were often worked as quarries for stone tools. Whenever I am visiting that country, the call of black cockatoos draws my awareness away from the experience of landscape to a more imagined space—one that I cannot fully comprehend. I become aware of the passing of generations, of tradition and language, and a profound sense of belonging driven by knowledge of loss.

These associations are emotional, and they nourish a wane spirit residing quietly inside; calling forth what I imagine as deeply-embedded race memories that might be encoded among the 'junk DNA' of my genome. The power of Glover's image, and this imagining for me, proceeds from my efforts to conceive of a time and place when the blood in my ancestors' veins flowed along with the waters of these rivers. The confluence of these flows occurred in an everyday dialogue, lived by commensurate beings in the landscape—animal, vegetable and mineral. An everyday participation with something that many now seek to re-establish a connection with—something we now call Nature.

But I am wary in this reverie. The image is rooted in Arcadian romanticism. It is unlikely that it touches only that which proceeds from my Aboriginality. I have spent far too long being educated by the Christian West, and raised in a culture that still embraces the image of the Noble Savage—invested with splendid visions of a far-off Eden. And it is to this Eden that I turn for my critique of the small beginnings of Indigenous tourism in Tasmania.

Eden provides a mythological stage upon which it is possible to see some familiar dramas now being replayed in Tasmania. In this drama we can see the continuation of an age-old quest by the West to somehow win a return to Paradise. Rather than a frightening wilderness,

untamed by human hand, Tasmania can now be seen as a refuge; a place of renewal, where primal energies can somehow flow from an unspoiled landscape to renew a spirit tired from the endless pursuit of happiness. Tasmania has become an eco-tourism Eden.

The pilgrims to this Eden are seldom satisfied by their naïve conceptions of wilderness. They seek participation with Nature that is mediated by a visitor-friendly garden. Tourism also recognises a space in the garden for an Adam and Eve. A modern rendition of Rousseau's Noble Savage, the tourist-friendly Aborigine offers an encounter with the Other for today's visitors. In Tasmania, a tourist can find a didgeridoo-playing Indigene who will gladly share knowledge of bush foods and maybe even traditionally-cooked kangaroo meat. It is now possible for the tourist to have access to the wisdom of an Elder, learn to make native string, weave a basket, or even make a stone tool.

The encounter that tourists make in this context is what Lynette Russell in her book *Savage Imaginings* calls a 'Nationalistic Aboriginality', where Aboriginal culture becomes a signifier for everything Aboriginal. A fundamental aspect of European colonisation and subjugation, Russell argues that 'Nationalistic Aboriginality' first renders Indigenous culture as '... a static and silent object, to be studied by the coloniser, who simultaneously becomes the expert' (2001, p.19). This is not so different to when the French and British arrived in Tasmania, seeking a new Paradise just over two hundred years ago.

The European search for Eden dates back to at least the time of Saint Brendan, an Irish abbot born about AD 484 in Tralee. According to medieval legends, Brendan embarked on a seven-year voyage through the Atlantic in search of the Garden of Eden. These legends recount Brendan's adventures, including his encounter with a whale, upon whose back he celebrated Easter. Brendan and his band of monks eventually discovered a brightly-lit land through which flowed a river. After wandering the land for 40 days in an unsuccessful search for the farthest shore, they loaded their vessels with precious gems and returned home. Brendan died soon afterward, in AD 578, but his fabulous island became a standard feature on maps for the next millenia. The *Navigatio Brendani*, which dates from about 1050, contains the earliest surviving Latin translation of this story.

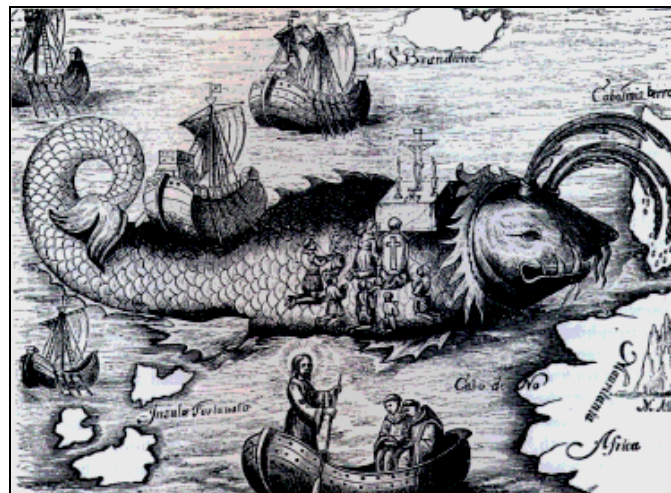


Figure 2: Anon, date unknown. *Saint Brendan's Search for Paradise* (reproduced in Gislason 1996a: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/hns/garden/brendan.html>).

Captain John Smith, in his *General History* (1622), acknowledged Brendan's quest of a thousand years before. But for Smith, the most noble of quests was undertaken by Sir Walter Raleigh, who set sail from the Thames in two small barques, under the command of captains Amodas and Barlow, on 27 April 1584.

The second of Iuly [1584] they fell with the coast of *Florida* in shoule water, where they felt a most delicate sweete smell, though they saw no land, which ere long they espied, thinking it the Continent: an hundred and twenty myles they sayled not finding any harbour ... they found their first landing place very sandy and low, but so full of grapes that the very surge of the Sea sometimes over-flowed them: of which they found such plenty in all places, both on the sand, the greene soyle and hils, as in the plaines as well on euey little shrub, as also climbing towards the tops of high Cedars, that they did thinke in the world were not the like abundance (cited Gislason 1996b: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/hns/garden/smith.html>).

Ninety-one years before, on 15 February 1493, Columbus had written in a similar vein to King Ferdinand of Spain of his discoveries in the West Indies.

The nightingale was singing and other birds of a thousand kinds ... There are six or eight kinds of palm, which are a wonder to behold on account of their beautiful variety, but so are the other trees and fruits and plants. In it are marvellous pine groves; there are very wide and fertile plains, and there is honey; and there are birds of many kinds and fruits in great diversity. In the interior, there are mines of metals, and the population is without number.

Columbus reported that men and women 'go naked ... as their mothers bore them, although some of the women cover a single place with the leaf of a plant' (cited in Gislason 1996c: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/hns/garden/columbus.html>).

Well before this, Plato, in his *Critias*, had written of another Paradise—Atlantis:

... whatever fragrant things there now are in the earth, whether roots, or herbage, or woods, or essences which distil from fruit and flower, grew and thrived in that land; also the fruit which admits of cultivation, both the dry sort, which is given us for nourishment and any other which we use for food—we call them all by the common name pulse, and the fruits having a hard rind, affording drinks and meats and ointments, and good store of chestnuts and the like, which furnish pleasure and amusement, and are fruits which spoil with keeping, and the pleasant kinds of dessert, with which we console ourselves after dinner, when we are tired of eating—all these that sacred island which then beheld the light of the sun, brought forth fair and wondrous and in infinite abundance (cited in <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/hns/garden/plato.html>)

In each of these accounts of far-off places, encountered and imagined, there are a number of recurrent themes. The quest is for abundance, and what is found is a population living in paradise, beckoning indulgence and exploitation. The contemporary tourist brings a continuation of this tradition to Tasmania; a new Eden is found, offering abundance for the modern explorer. And like these early travellers, today's tourists are ready to find natives at play. Innocent. Generous. Guileless.

However, no Eden is complete without a snake. But where is it to be found? Perhaps it is coiled among the strategies and policies of public administrations such as the (now-defunct) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, State and Federal tourism agencies, and the tourism industry itself. The Serpent, in this case, is a new incarnation of assimilation. It is inherent in the drive toward self-determination through economic independence from welfare. This is not to say that freedom from welfare dependency for Aboriginal people is undesirable. But the Serpent may be a dangerous one, inviting Tasmanian Aboriginal people to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The Tree of Knowledge offers everything to everyone. It allows anyone to harvest and anyone to package and distribute. The Forbidden Fruit is cultural appropriation—a skill long-practiced by commercial interests intent on rendering dot paintings into unauthorised carpets made in Vietnam, and producing ‘genuine’ hand-painted boomerangs in China.

As Aborigines begin to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, the need to import such commodities subsides, because Aboriginal people will now satisfy the demand. Authenticity, a fine-sounding qualification that guarantees enhanced satisfaction for the increasingly sophisticated and cashed-up tourist, is itself being commodified. Authenticity no longer intrinsically occurs—it can now be bought. Demand generates supply, so if tourist operators say that their coach-loads want to hear a didgeridoo while they are in Tasmania, then they will hear it. If consumers demand dot paintings, then they will find them. It does not matter that the didgeridoo isn’t indigenous to Tasmania, or that dot paintings come from the central deserts of Australia.

According to archaeologist and linguist Juris Zarins, ejection from the original Garden of Eden (which he believes was located below current sea level in the north of the Persian Gulf) occurred during the Neolithic Wet Phase, around 6000 BC (Hamblin 1987). This coincided with a change from reliance on hunting and gathering to agriculture; a key step in the separation of Man and Nature. Original sin, according to Simon Schama (1996), is civilisation. The Fall of Man can therefore be seen as marking a shift from participation with Nature, to manipulation of Nature. In the Tasmanian context, the Fall is set to be repeated as Aborigines are separated from a traditionally authentic relationship with nature by an inauthentic simulation of Indigenous culture that is staged for the tourist.

For Aborigines, tourism brings the seductive invitation to re-imagine ourselves. Not as we have learned ourselves to be through our particular experience of history; through living with a heritage formed by the physical and meta-physical qualities of this island, but as a simulacrum—a trope of what might have been. We become a select, constructed tableau that entertains the tourist. We are encouraged to adjust a culture that has been cultivated by two thousand generations of living in Tasmania and scarred by two hundred years of colonisation. The result is increasing separation from a culture of intimate association with the context of place that has produced specific, characteristic language, stories, beliefs and practices. It is a separation from authentic, Indigenous Tasmanian-ness. But more than that, we are encouraged to transform ourselves into what we never were.

Stuart Hall in his *Formations of Modernity* writes:

Cultural identity is a matter of becoming, as well as being. It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo transformations (1992, p. 225).

Our transformation is encouraged. Why? Partly because in Tasmania, we have lost so much. There is a vacuum to be filled. The tourist desires what we do not have to give. This is because the specification of the desired product is developed elsewhere: by those who are unfamiliar with Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. We willingly assume the trappings of popular conception and popular desire in return for a place in the tourism economy. This transformation provides an illustration of the ‘intersubjectivity’ of Aboriginality described by Marcia Langton. Drawing on the sociology of Durkheim, Langton (1994, p. 98) argues that ‘Aboriginality arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue’, either through lived or mediated experience. It is a new kind of assimilation where, rather than become Europeanised as was imagined in the 1920s, we are homogenised into a Pan-indigeneity. We allow our opinion of what tourists want to influence what we imagine ourselves to be.

In recent years I am hearing of tribal and place names that are entirely new. Traditional cultural practices are being freshly imagined. Individuals who I have known for years are appearing with innovated titles. This is not to say that what is happening is somehow invalid or wrong. As Hall (1992) says, cultural identities transform. But I am nervous about that which we allow to drive our cultural transformation.

In the process of meeting and returning the colonial gaze, we reconstruct our identities as Other to the colonial self. David Hollinsworth (1992) described Aboriginality in terms of three discourses—of descent, of culture-tradition and of resistance. We now need to add a fourth discourse to the formation of Aboriginality: the discourse of co-option. Tourism brings with it a new Aboriginality: an Aboriginality of negotiation and accommodation. This may sound innocuous, or even a relief after years of Aboriginality driven by oppositional consciousness. But the Aboriginality of accommodation remains subject to the relations of power, particularly of economic power. Within this Aboriginality, the best we can hope for is what Gayatri Spivak (1995, p. 214) might call ‘strategic essentialism’—a role-play that is becomes increasingly addictive. At worst, it is a mockery.



Figure 3: ‘Diorama of Tasmanian Aboriginal Life’. Postcard (n.d.), Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Reproduced with permission. **AWAITING WRITTEN PERMISSION**

The pictured diorama, which has inspired the imaginations of generations of school children passing through the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, was erroneously constructed from the start as a nuclear family. But the demands of the tourist industry only confound the misrepresentation. Imagine this scene now with a didgeridoo, an incomplete dot painting resting by the fire and the clap of boomerangs, syncopating with the electronic click of a dozen digital cameras, and you have a scene that is being played out today for tourists. The tableau depicts us as relics of the past. But worse, we are becoming relics of a past that is not even ours.

Ultimately, as Gerald Sidler points out, there occurs a paradox whereby the presentation of imagery that is preferred by Europeans acts to underline their authority over Indigenous identity. Even offering the tourist an account of resistance to colonial oppression suffers a central contradiction. As Sidler puts it: ‘ordinarily the constructed, glorified past is interwoven with symbols and social imagery drawn from within the process of being dominated; (reconstructing) the historical identity in resistance to, and partial separation from domination ... is to reconstruct domination’ (1994, p. 118).

In Tasmania we now have warring Aboriginal tourism entrepreneurs, each denying the authenticity of each other’s product. Is one right and the other wrong? Or has authenticity itself become lost among the financial statements and coach visits? One final question remains. If, in this replay of the drama of Man’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are to be Aborigines, the Serpent is economic independence and the Tree of Knowledge is the freedom to reinvent ourselves, unconstrained by history of tradition—then who is God? Who has the essential Biblical role of the Omniscient, with a loving and ever-present guiding hand? For all my imagining, I have not been able to detect the presence of this character in our drama. It appears that Yahweh is as unconcerned with Indigenes now as he was in earlier millennia. I can only conclude that the opportunities for social and economic development through participation in the tourism industry lie on as godless a path to alienation from the land as any other that leads us to capital gain.

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