

REVIEW BY EVA CZERNIS-RYL

Dorothy Erickson,
Inspired by Light & Land.
Designers and Makers in Western
Australia, Western Australian
Museum, Welshpool WA 2015.
Hardcover, 491 pages, 423 colour
and b/w photographs, chronology,
bibliography, index, \$90.
ISBN 978-1-920843-19-9

Published as the first of two hardcover volumes (the second will cover the period from 1950 to now), this is Dr Dorothy Erickson's most ambitious publishing venture. Exploring the work of designers and makers in Western Australia since the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829 until 1969, it is her most significant contribution to the history of decorative arts and design in Australia.

The book delves into the history of applied arts practised in Western Australia in its first 140 years: furniture, woodwork and pokerwork, wildflower paintings, needlework, embroidery and woolwork pictures, ceramics and china painting, jewellery and metalwork as well as stained

glass, graphic design, book illustration and printed textiles. Interior design, aspects of architecture and even boat building complement the impressive spectrum of creative pursuits discussed.

While essentially maintaining chronological continuum, this well designed book is organised into seven thematic chapters to highlight distinctive Western Australian developments. The first chapter covers the early colonial period from 1829 to 1849, and the second chapter examines convict contributions and work crafted prior to the gold fever era of 1890–1910, the subject of the third chapter. An extensive discussion of what Erickson calls the Domestic Art Movement precedes two chapters that survey various creative activities and changing fortunes of the years between 1919 and 1949: “Boom, Depression and War” discusses handcrafted works of leading makers, and “Post Depression and War” looks at commercial production of ceramics and jewellery, which met with somewhat limited interest in Western Australia, and the output of amateur makers who trained at private art schools and Perth Technical College or practised their craft as members of The Western Australian Women's Society of Fine Arts and Crafts and Country Women's Association. The volume concludes with “The Renaissance of the Artist Craftsman” of the period 1950–70.

Although envisaged as an introduction to the subject, this lavishly illustrated book is comprehensive enough to engage the reader in a lively narrative of the history of Western Australia's portable heritage and interior decoration. Images of objects are interspersed with contextual paintings and photographs, revealing individual and collective stories carefully reconstructed from archival records, family papers and letters, exhibition catalogues and press reports. The wealth of information provided

is a result of decades of painstaking research and Erickson's commitment to documenting the richness of creative practices in Western Australia.

As demonstrated in her other landmark and out-of-print publication *Gold and Silversmithing in Western Australia: A History*, Erickson is as much interested in objects as in people who designed, made and used them. This is partly because of her background: a descendant of a Western Australian gold miner, and the daughter of eminent wildflower painter and historian Dr Rica Erickson, she has been a practising studio jeweller since the 1970s. Erickson grew up with the stories she writes about in the book and was herself a pioneer of the post-war crafts movement introduced in the last chapter. The result is a wonderfully rich tapestry of a book in which multi-angled perspectives are skilfully interwoven so that the reader gets a real sense not only of the significance of objects discussed but also of these people's lives, their aspirations and achievements.

The book's scope and structure mean that some areas are covered in more detail than others, and that a few subjects overlap, resulting in some repetition. I have no problem with this, as this approach helps to highlight some of the most fascinating characters in the survey. Take for example the Calcutta-born Henry Prinsep whose art tutor in London was George Frederick Watts, RA. A Perth civil servant and artist who moved in the highest social circles in the 1880s, he taught art, played violin, wrote poetry and designed and painted striking interiors and sets for dramatic productions. He was probably as charismatic as but less “artistic” than the legendary artist James W R Linton who, after arriving in Perth from London in 1898, led by teaching and example the modern handicraft revival in the first two decades of the 20th century.

Another popular and influential figure was Ferenc (Francis) Kotai, a Hungarian potter who came to Western Australia in 1950, soon becoming an inspiring teacher at the Fremantle Technical College, mentoring the post-war generation of potters. You will have no difficulty in finding interesting women too: from Bessie Mabel Rischbieth, a designer-maker who was also one of Australia's most influential feminists, to the wonderfully creative ceramicist Flora Landells, the modernist textile designer Helen Grey-Smith and the ceramic sculptor and painter Marina Shaw, who was once described as Australia's answer to Clarice Cliff.

It is highly likely that you will see for the first time in this book a rare photograph of the Iron Palace on the Green or the 1881 Perth International Exhibition building (Henry Prinsep painted its dome's interior). Photography, a keenly pursued art form in the colony from at least the 1850s, featured prominently in the exhibition which followed those in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide; this exhibition is where "the excellent design and manufacture" of furniture by Smith & Co as well as the talents of the jeweller Frederick Mason, among others, were recognised by First Order of Merit awards.

Similarly, it is not well known that Western Australia had its own pavilion at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900. Alongside gold and other minerals which filled a special court, William Howitt's carved and marquetry furniture and an entire wall of wildflower paintings by Lady Forrest took pride of place, asserting Western Australia's patriotism and identity.

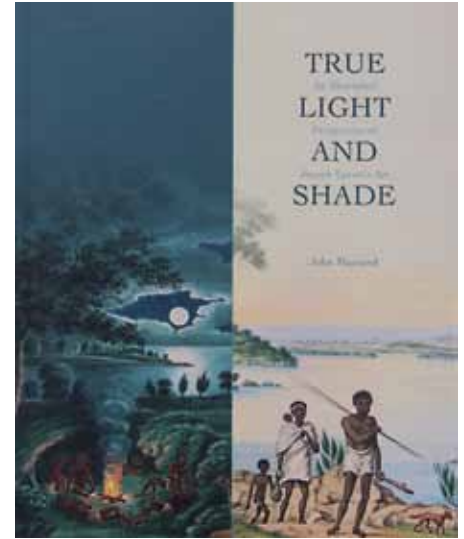
In any tome of almost 500 pages, readers are always grateful for clear navigational signposts which facilitate information finding. For most of the time, breaking up each of the seven chapters into thematic essays or sections fulfils this role successfully. I was left however with a feeling that

this editorial portioning was at times excessive, seemingly imposed late in the process and now causing confusion. One example is the section entitled "The Glasgow Exhibition 1902". Right from the beginning it continues the narrative of the preceding section which is dedicated to the 1900 Paris exhibition. There is no information here about the Glasgow show, however we learn that the talented May Creeth, a wildflower painter who is first discussed, exhibited in Paris alongside several others like the furniture makers Charles and Herbert Locke who won a silver medal. Eventually we find a mention that both also had "exhibits sent to Glasgow".

Several other makers reviewed in this section (including my favourite, New Norcia's Spanish woodworker Juan Casellas) had no connection with the Glasgow Exhibition, while we learn that the stone and woodcarver Edward G. Madeley in fact won a medal at the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition. Finally, bearing in mind that the last chapter "The Renaissance of the Artist Craftsman" covers the period 1950–70, shouldn't the discussion of Robin and Helen McArthur's work of the 1980s and 1990s wait patiently for its turn in what I am sure will be an equally splendid volume?

Apart from the above minor quibbles about editorial imperfections, this ground-breaking book is an outstanding achievement and an invaluable addition to the existing literature on the history of decorative arts and design in Australia. You will enjoy reading it. One hopes that this publication will inspire similar historical surveys of designers and makers who lived and worked in other states.

Eva Czernis-Ryl curated the current exhibition *A Fine Possession: Jewellery and Identity* at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, and edited *Brilliant: Australian Gold and Silver 1851–1950* for Powerhouse Publishing in 2011.



REVIEW BY JOHN RAMSLAND

John Maynard,
True Light and Shade
An Aboriginal Perspective of
Joseph Lycett's Art,
NLA Publishing, ACT, 2014.
Soft cover, 172 pp \$49.99.
ISBN 978-0-642-27708-4

Over the last 20 years or so interest in convict artist Joseph Lycett (1775–1828) has steadily quickened and heightened in Australian popular culture through the influence of various published works and exhibitions. He is now held in high regard by art and cultural historians.

John Maynard's magnificent book sheds fresh light and sharper insights on the true nature of the continuing Aboriginal presence in the landscape depicted by Lycett, now regarded as a significant creative and decorative artist of the early colonial period. He was a valued recorder of what he saw in the infant prison colony.

In the Bicentennial Year, 1988, another celebrated Aborigine, the late Burnum Burnum (Harry Penrith), made a fleeting, well-intentioned attempt at interpreting Lycett's paintings from an Aboriginal perspective using five of his artworks to

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illustrate relevant parts of his attractive book, *Burnum Burnum's Aboriginal Australia. A Traveller's Guide* (edited by David Stewart),¹ that sweeps across the continent in its valiant attempt to be holistic. The artworks are presented in colour and enhance Burnum Burnum's book and its perspective.

Unfortunately, some of the editing is careless, flawed in nature and ahistorical. One of the works, "Aborigines feeding from beached whales" (1820), had been accidentally reversed losing its geographic placement. The caption is wrong: the stranded whale and occasional Aboriginal banquet scene is not on Nobby's Ocean Beach since the Newcastle breakwater on which the artificial beach was developed was not yet fully constructed.

Maynard, on the other hand, correctly places this watercolour at Bar Beach. He points out:

The scene is unquestionably present-day Bar [Ocean] Beach (just south of Newcastle) with its distinctive rocks being battered by waves on the left, viewed from the cliffs that lead to Dixon Park on the right.

The distinctive rocks depicted in the painting can indeed still be identified in the same placement, along with the rugged cliff face to the left. It demonstrates Lycett's power to record in visual terms a historical event he had observed in the Newcastle district of the Hunter Valley, NSW. This kind of historical accuracy and insight is the hallmark of John Maynard's singular achievement and can be found throughout the book. In another work, "Aborigines feeding from beached whales" (c 1820), the place is incorrectly identified as Susan Gilmore Beach – the terrain is wrong.²

As a Worimi man, Professor Maynard brings his own accumulated knowledge and insight into a fine visual and verbal exploration of Lycett's most telling artworks, particularly emphasising those found in *The Lycett Album*,³ a sketchbook

of 20 watercolours and gouache paintings showing the life and country of the Awabakal and Worimi peoples of the Newcastle district and the Eora people of Sydney in the period between 1816 and 1822. They are innovatively presented to create a well-founded analysis of how and why Lycett portrayed Aboriginal economic activities and rituals in the manner he did.

The methodology of presenting the images as a whole first and then breaking them up into important segments for discussion is a technique that works perfectly. In the Bar Beach scene, intensive consideration of its various cultural features runs for eight magnificently presented pages that fascinate the reader's imagination.

Each of Lycett's artworks chosen by Maynard is presented in a similar fashion throughout this superbly conceived volume. The author has set a very high standard for other authors to emulate in dealing historically with colonial art.

John Maynard – recently honoured with the award of a Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences – argues (page 14) with conviction that:

Joseph Lycett's work captures Aboriginal land and culture, not frozen in time but ongoing, both prior to his work and continuing to the present. This understanding challenges the deeply entrenched misconception that Aboriginal land, culture and place are locked into the ancient past, somehow frozen in time and space.

As an eminent Australian historian of Indigenous issues, Maynard places Lycett's visual work into the context of contemporary and other writers especially of the Hunter where the artist completed many of his works concerning Aborigines, such as the Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, William Scott, Robert

Dawson, Edward Parry, Lieutenant Coke – all of whom had a strong association with local Aboriginal individuals and clans. Their descriptions, biases and views are calibrated neatly against Lycett's existing visual representations in a most appropriate, praiseworthy and skilfully analytic manner.

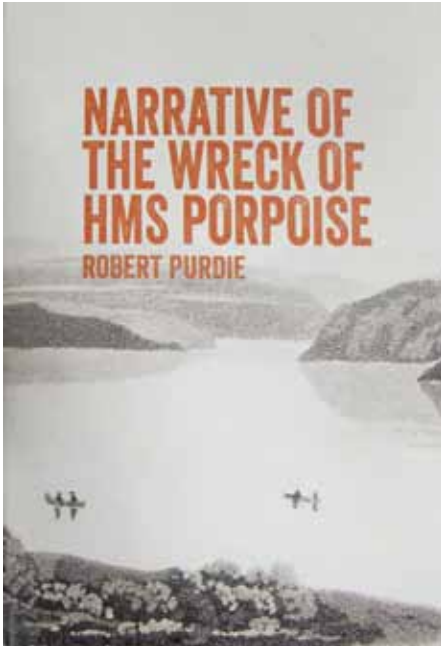
As Maynard has acknowledged, local Newcastle historian John Turner was a pioneer in Lycett studies, who, however, does not make an in-depth analysis of the depiction of Aborigines in the artist's work.⁴ In his entry on Joseph Lycett in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Rex Rienits does not even mention that the artist gave Aborigines a prominent place in his artworks⁵ – a case of conscious, or unconscious, amnesia, even of writing Aborigines out of Australian history.

Clearly, John Maynard has comprehensively filled an important gap and in so doing has restored a living knowledge of the artist's most significant subject – the economic, cultural and ritual activities of the First People of the Australian continent. Thus John Maynard's impressive book is a fitting companion to (editor) John McPhee's outstanding work, *Joseph Lycett. Convict Artist*, in providing a compelling revisionary perspective.

John Ramsland OAM is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Newcastle, NSW.

NOTES

- 1 Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988, pp 32f, 35, 36, 37, 57.
- 2 John McPhee (ed.), *Joseph Lycett Convict Artist*, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney 2006, p 108.
- 3 Collection: National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- 4 John Turner, *Joseph Lycett. Governor Macquarie's convict artist*, Hunter History Publications, Newcastle, 1997, pp 14, 17, 82, 88f, 92f, 108.
- 5 Douglas Pike (gen.ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 2, Melbourne University Press, Carlton 1967, p 140f.



REVIEW BY PAUL DONNELLY

Robert Purdie (edited and with an introduction by Matthew Fishburn), *Narrative of the wreck of HMS Porpoise*, Hordern House, Potts Point NSW 2014. Hardcover, 137 pp, 225 x 155 mm, \$35. ISBN 875567 73 7.

Hordern House continues their excellent service in the publication of early colonial history by releasing Robert Purdie's *Narrative of the Wreck of HMS Porpoise* hot on the heels of Elizabeth Ellis's book on *The Sydney Punchbowl* in the Mitchell Library. Here the subject is a first-hand description of the foundering of HMS *Porpoise*, wrecked on 17 August 1803 together with HMS *Cato* on the then uncharted Great Barrier Reef, when returning Matthew Flinders to London with his first batch of precious surveying charts.

This characteristically well-bound hardcover publication by Hordern House brings together the account

originally published anonymously in eight instalments of the *Naval Chronicle* spanning 1806–7. Through evaluating a number of clues within the narrative and comparing them with the ship's muster, Fishburn for the first time narrows the potential candidates of authorship of this romp to an individual. He identifies the author as the surgeon's mate on HMS *Investigator*, a young Scot, Robert Purdie, whose name can now join Flinders' as the only eye-witness accounts of this event.

Identifying the author is an important achievement in itself and for the reader it, for the first time, obligingly conjures up a mental image of him. Purdie was 24 at the time of the wreck and his account portrays a sensitive and curious young man cognisant of his participation in history and motivated to record it for posterity. Purdie's narrative is of the ilk of other first-hand accounts of the period by Watkin Tench and William Dawes.

While the wreck of the *Porpoise* is a strong focus of the book, Purdie's account, published as it was in instalments in the *Naval Chronicle*, appears to have served as a vehicle for him to muse on a surprisingly wide range of subjects: from coral formation and its part in the creation of islands, to the celebrated mystery of La Perouse's fate, and Sydney's potential as a future abode of choice.

Purdie has much to say about the young town of Sydney and the extent of its environs as far as the Blue Mountains, beyond which was still a mystery of much interest to him. Of an economist's bent, he considered Sydney had many advantages for its potential natural and mineral resources as well as the "mild and equable climate" which he felt was better than "all places he had seen" and which cumulatively would see the colony sooner than later "being able to support itself".

His commentaries on the convict population in particular betray an enlightened and sensitive character. Purdie

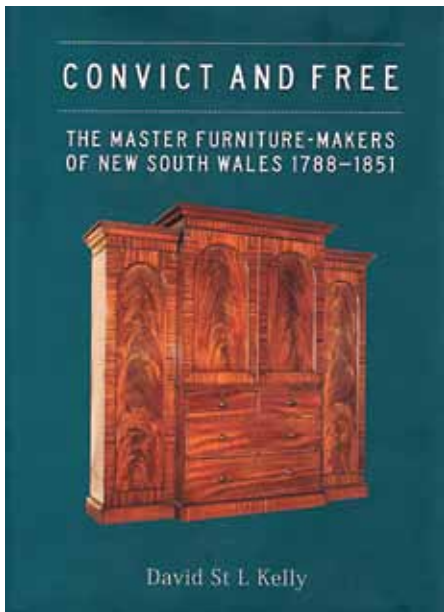
divides Sydney's population into three broad classes: convicts, settlers and native born and he is as sanguine about the convicts as he is about the weather. His generous summation of those transported was that the majority had "excellent dispositions" though due to "a moment of idleness or thoughtlessness have been misled; and in an unlucky moment committed some crime, which, though not of a black moral tendency, has so far offended against the laws as to cause their transportation." Not a blind idealist however, he gladly concedes a minority were subject to "rascality ... for the sake of being wicked and mischievous".

Purdie's magnanimous character is again betrayed when he encounters the bleached remains of a shipwreck which he guessed to be of European origin, and more specifically La Perouse who, regardless of the French Wars and Flinders' incarceration at Mauritius, he nobly notes "may be justly styled the French Cook".

The return voyage to Britain on the *Rolla* is rushed in comparison but still awash with his intelligent observations and insights on peoples, nature, and geology. After he reached on 7 October 1804 the "chops of the Channel," one gets the impression that the experience of arriving home paled in comparison to the adventure he had in getting there: "I will henceforth look back on the voyage in the *Investigator*, with its appendix in the *Porpoise*, with feelings of adoration, gratitude, and delight."

This highly enjoyable book is helpfully supplemented by the editor with notes elaborating on people, events and obscurities in the original text.

Dr Paul Donnelly is a curator at the Powerhouse site of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, responsible for Australian ceramics and glass, furniture, 20th-century design, numismatics and antiquities.



REVIEW BY JOHN WADE

David St L Kelly, *Convict and Free. The Master Furniture Makers of New South Wales 1788–1851*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2014. Hardcover, 377 pp, 294 x 218 cm, \$90 ISBN 978-1-925003-16-1

David Kelly sets out in this book to chart the history of 100 or so master cabinet-makers working in New South Wales up to 1850. His introduction discusses that bland sentence in some detail, meticulously defining those terms and the parameters of his research. Then Kelly outlines the structure of the book, sources and various other points to help the reader; it is both essential and illuminating to read the introduction, as well as amusing to see him struggle to try to set strict guidelines when the data, cantankerously, defies his definitions and conventions.

He gathers the evidence from many sources, the most important being the searchable, digitised records of newspapers made available on the National Library of Australia's Trove website (trove.nla.gov.au),

to which more newspapers – particularly regional ones – are being added all the time. Trove has made the researcher's task so much easier and comprehensive today. Other information is gleaned from musters, shipping records, State Records, Births Deaths and Marriages, court records and secondary sources. Several cabinetmakers previously discussed in the pages of *Australiana* get fuller treatment here.

Each cabinetmaker entry is treated in exactly the same manner, under similar headings. Much of the information is qualified, presented according to the rules of evidence – as you would expect from a distinguished lawyer. Kelly has mined the sources and distilled from them the personal lives of individual furniture makers, their business, their products, their clients and their employees.

David Kelly's book is a magnificent achievement in compiling, assessing and ordering the information about early cabinetmakers. He has succeeded in presenting and adding to – in a handy format – the information about the well-known cabinetmakers, as well as adding some new ones. Moreover, he envisages this book at a work in progress; he plans, with the help of comments and information from readers, to update the information, to add new material (including information on several more previously unknown cabinet-makers) and to issue the revisions as a supplement on disc.

Some will complain that the paucity of illustrations, the rigorous approach and the extensive use of footnoted sources makes the book too scholarly, even dry. That view is hard to justify with such a cast of colourful characters and events paraded through the text; who can forget the venomous abuse and violent clash between cabinet-maker James Templeton and the jeweller James Watt in 1839 (p 201f), previously exposed in Kelly's article in *Australiana* in August 2011?

Australiana pot-boiler picture books have long since been replaced by comprehensive

studies, notably by authors such as Kevin Fahy, synthesising our state of knowledge. Anyone who thinks *Australiana* encompasses only products such as vegemite and Akubras (soon to be made with Russian rabbit fur) is plain ignorant.

This book should be regarded as a source of information to mine. Kelly is already compiling a second book, growing out of the research presented here, which will focus on the furniture. Kelly – possibly the only person to read this book right through – is in a unique position to understand the complex workings of the colonial furniture industry. We can expect his next book to address the structure of the industry, which comprised many specialist workers, who diversified into activities such as undertaking (to make better use of their horses, stables and carts) and importing for survival. An overall examination of the human resource issues and economic factors will add to our understanding of the industry.

It is too much for one person to compile histories of each cabinetmaker, illustrating many examples from their workshops – workshops which employed up to 60 workers. That's a task for all of us, expanding the material provided here.

Inevitably and in spite of the best of intentions some errors have slipped through – for instance, Kevin Fahy is promoted to AO instead of AM (a nice tribute from the author!) and Caroline Simpson and Christina Simpson are confused on one occasion. Minor glitches are hardly surprising in nearly 400 pages. They should not be allowed to detract from the immensity of his achievement.

Publication of this research is an interactive process, so if you can contribute, contact David Kelly at colonial@colonialhill.com

John Wade worked at Sydney University, several museums, an auction house and in magazine publishing. He now edits *Australiana* and runs a small cattle farm near Grenfell NSW.