

## **Beyond our normal field of vision ... the impact of art on community bushfire understandings**

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### **Abstract**

Community educators may assume they are working with a “blank canvas” when delivering bushfire prevention and preparedness programs. But a variety of social and cultural influences can affect people's understandings of such events. These include the mass media, film, television, literature, art, popular culture and the internet.

Representations in literature — especially children's literature — and the visual arts in Australia over the past two centuries have added to the popular vision of bushfire, conditioning people to certain beliefs and even suggesting certain courses of action in response. While the extent to which such sources affect people's decision making remains largely unexplored, their potential to influence critical decisions cannot be ignored.

This paper focuses on the influence of the visual arts in defining Australian perceptions of bushfire since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Fire has an elemental place in art beyond the purely documentary. In that sense, it is part of an artistic continuum not shared by later records, such as film and photography. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artistic depictions were often the only visual record of fire. Artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have been less restricted by the need to record fire than their predecessors. This has permitted more fluid forms of interpretation in line with other evolutions in the visual arts. The paper argues that community responses to fire in art are an important factor in shaping people's overall attitude towards fire in the Australian landscape.

The limited discourse on the impact of culturally derived understandings of disaster (including bushfires) and community perceptions is discussed.

### **Introduction**

*“The historian is to myth what the ferret is to the rabbit. The historian burrows down after myth, hunts it down and destroys it if he can.”* — Bernard Smith<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of beliefs, understandings and myths attached to bushfire by the broader Australian community. The origins of some of these are obscure. In a modern context it is easy to attribute at least some beliefs to the mass media or to popular culture. Yet there has been surprisingly little exploration of other ways in which cultural understandings about bushfire have been nurtured and maintained, despite attention having been paid to other Australian iconography such as the beach, the landscape and even the horse. <sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the connection between art and bushfires is perhaps not one that readily springs to mind, except in terms of the destructive potential of the latter upon the former. In the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, a significant private collection held at the Bonython family home in the Adelaide hills was destroyed. Kym Bonython, entrepreneur and art collector, lost paintings by Sidney Nolan, Brett Whiteley, Arthur Boyd and many others in a collection then valued at \$750,000. In August 2007, he donated the only painting to survive – a portrait by John Brack – to the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra.<sup>3</sup> Victorian barrister Cliff Pannam QC lost works by Eugen von Guerard,

Frederick McCubbin and Sidney Nolan when his home burnt down on the same day at Mount Macedon.<sup>4</sup> The extent to which art has affected the way in which Australians consider fire is evidently a matter of some conjecture. Pictorial art, suggests Julia Horne, has been one of the most significant vehicles in the creation of a European notion of Australia.<sup>5</sup> Educationalist Malcolm Gillies argues that the visual arts “have been frequent in their portrayal of fire’s effects upon the national landscape”.<sup>6</sup> Yet art historian Sally Butler considers that fire (and wind) feature less often as artistic themes than earth and water.<sup>7</sup>

Volume is perhaps less important than the extent to which art has encouraged or added to myths about fire and its place in the landscape. In an age of instant communication and the live broadcasting of sounds and images, it is difficult to imagine the impact that a static art work of oil on canvas or a simple watercolour or a pen and ink drawing could have upon a 19<sup>th</sup> century viewer. Art then was an important means not just for satisfying aesthetic needs, but also of conveying contemporary information and recording significant events for posterity. On one level visual artists — especially those working for illustrated publications — performed much the same role as newspaper photographers or news camera operators would in later years.<sup>8</sup>

On another level, fire has an elemental place in art beyond the documentary. In that sense, it is part of an artistic continuum not shared by later forms of documentation such as film and photography. Its evolution reflects that. Artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have been less restricted by the need to record fire than their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors. That has permitted more fluid forms of interpretation in line with other evolutions in the visual arts.

Three broad themes emerge from the body of work examined in this paper. The first is the idea of flight. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the message conveyed in many artistic renditions of fire is that the safest course of action in the face of a bushfire is to flee. A second theme to emerge is that there is very little that humans can do in the face of an overwhelming event such as a bushfire. A third recurrent vision in Australia’s bushfire art is that the aftermath is one of desolation seemingly without hope. Few artists have approached the fire from the perspective of it being a force of renewal and regeneration.

Each of these themes contradicts prevailing views about how to understand, cope with and position bushfire in the Australian landscape. Flight in the immediate face of fire is in contrast to the more deliberate “stay or go” message promoted by Australian fire authorities which places an emphasis on the message that a well-prepared and planned property is defensible in a bushfire event and that last minute evacuation is a deadly option. Similarly, the idea that humans can do little in the event of a bushfire to defend life and property is contradicted by the experience of recent years in which many people have successfully defended themselves and their homes. Finally, there is the stark denial of bushfire’s natural place as a force for renewal in the Australian environment implicit in the dark, brooding scenes of devastation painted by so many artists.

## Discussion

The accuracy with which catastrophic events were captured by colonial artists and the degree to which they suffered from the vagaries of “artistic licence” has been the subject of some analysis.<sup>9</sup> Writing in relation to shipwrecks, Mark Staniforth argues that images of these events varied in their degree of accuracy, even when committed to paper or canvas shortly after the event by those who had experienced them. Once in the hands of engravers for the illustrated press, these images took on the form of “artist’s impressions” which conveyed the drama and dangers of an event but “to extremes that exceed the bounds of credibility”. Staniforth goes on to suggest that the depictions are so liberal as render most images of shipwrecks romantic rather than reliable historical documents.<sup>10</sup> The same argument might be made of the literal depiction of bushfire in colonial art, were it not that many canvases and watercolours almost seemed to fall short in their rendition of events.

Thomas Dunlap suggests that the 19<sup>th</sup> century artistic depiction of the Australian bush was highly selective. For the most part, painters eschewed the harsh, dry outback and its equally harsh, dry reality. Instead they stuck to the coastal areas where the Anglos lived and the inland pastures where their sheep grazed. Yet despite the romantic evocation of the bush at the hands of the Heidelberg School in particular, there were some concessions to the harshness of the bush.

Frederick McCubbin's *Lost* (1886) posited the lost child in the vast emptiness of the bush; likewise *A Bush Burial* (1890) by the same artist depicts the grief of a family against the backdrop of Australian landscape.

Unlike other colonial societies, according to Dunlap, fire intruded into Australian art, often in dramatic and immense canvases:

Australia is the only country where paintings of great fires hang in national galleries, and a title like *Gippsland, Sunday Night, Feb 20<sup>th</sup> 1898* was immediately understandable — and for many in that generation evocative.<sup>11</sup>

Landscape fires were hardly a common theme in the European artistic tradition. Indeed, the most striking depictions of fire in the landscape focus on urban events such as the Great Fire of London in 1666. Leonardo da Vinci considered a forest fire one of the most challenging elements to execute successfully.<sup>12</sup> Among the most famous European forest fire paintings are the works of Piero di Cosimo (c.1461-1522), a celebrated Florentine artist, whose painting *The forest fire* (c.1505) hangs in Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. While the artist painted at least two other landscapes in which fire was prominent, none of these three works were on public view until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and by then two were in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

So an immediate challenge for colonial artists was learning how to depict unfamiliar fire in a landscape that already presented challenges to a European eye. Indeed, a stylised European vision of the Australian landscape remained the norm until the rise of the Heidelberg School painters.<sup>14</sup> Even so, fire quickly became part of white Australian art. An early image was *Aborigines using fire to hunt kangaroos* (1817), painted in watercolour by the convict artist Joseph Lycett (c.1775-1828). The painting clearly shows fire being used to flush kangaroos and other game from the bush and was first published in 1830.<sup>15</sup> Unwittingly, Lycett, a convicted forger, was making a contribution to what would become an enduring debate about the use of Aboriginal fire in the landscape. Among the earliest extant depictions of uncontrolled wildfire are two more watercolours. *Bush Fire, Potts Point, 1840* (1840) by Thomas Wingate (1807-69) shows the threat of bushfire to Sydney from the still rural landscape of Potts Point.<sup>16</sup> A contemporary view is *An Australian Bushfire near Ermington* (c.1840)<sup>17</sup> by Frederick Garling (1806-73), better known as a maritime artist. Garling lived at Ermington, near Parramatta in NSW, from the early 1850s, which suggests the dating of the work may in fact be premature. Both paintings show fire in a pastoral setting, but with little of the energy or urgency of later depictions.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Duncan Cooper (c.1813-1904) portrayed much more of the spirit of a fire running through the sparsely treed country in western Victoria in the sepia tone *A bushfire near Mount Elephant, Victoria* (c.1845). Cooper was a squatter who painted elegant watercolours, several of which are now held by the National Library of Australia.<sup>19</sup>

Eugen von Guerard (1811-1901) was the first notable professional artist to depict bushfire. His study entitled *Bush fire between Mt Elephant and Timboon, 1857 (1859)*<sup>20</sup> stemmed from a trip to the Victorian Western District in March 1857, when he witnessed a vast conflagration. The horizontal composition reflects the vast sprawling flatness of the landscape. It is also said to be the only one of his paintings “depicting violence and terror in nature”.<sup>21</sup> It is a stunning image, in which the fire sprawls across the distant horizon from left to right against the backdrop of a moonlit sky. Its devastation, as one recent interpretation puts it, is implied rather than stated.<sup>22</sup> Von Guerard was obviously much affected by the scene, although the remainder of his Australian landscapes are wholly idyllic. He recorded one other fire in his sketchbooks (*Last Australian Bushfire*) before leaving the colonies in the 1880s.<sup>23</sup>

Two major works represent the oeuvre of fire's depiction in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian art. The first of these is *Black Thursday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1851* (1864) by William Strutt (1825-1915). Strutt arrived in Melbourne in July 1850, where he found work as an illustrator before heading off to the Ballarat goldfields a year later. His mining career was short-lived and he returned to Melbourne again to work as an illustrator. Strutt is best remembered for his portraits and for paintings and illustrations of historic events. He sketched the opening of the first Victorian Parliament in 1851 and the departure of Burke and Wills in 1860 with a view to their later use “as the source of imagery for major paintings about the founding years of the colony”.<sup>24</sup>

It was an ambitious vision and one which he could not satisfy in colonial Australia. Despite the immense riches being

won of the goldfields, there was little interest in public or private art at this stage of Victoria's development. Strutt returned to England in 1862. There he began work almost immediately on the image for which he is best remembered: *Black Thursday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, 1851* (1864). The first thing to note about this painting in oils, two years in the execution, is that it was not completed until 13 years after the event. It was painted in London and was largely the work of Strutt's imagination. Certainly, he was living and working in Melbourne on the day of what probably remains Victoria's most extensive bushfire disaster. Indeed, Strutt had been forced to stop work, so dark had the sky become over Melbourne due to smoke from the fires. According to George Mackaness, Strutt later "traversed the scene of the fire and made a great number of sketches of the scenes" which he incorporated in his major painting. There is no mention of this in Strutt's edited journal, although he was clearly deeply affected by the event. Much of the material in the artist's journal is evidently drawn from third-party sources, such as press reports. He used these to feed his impressions.<sup>25</sup>

The Black Thursday event itself has largely drifted from modern imagination. It is mentioned in dispatches, as it were, in the context of other great Victorian conflagrations of later years: Red Tuesday, Black Friday, Ash Wednesday and the Alpine Fires of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are few contemporary written records of the Black Thursday disaster and the extent to which it affected the infant colony, not yet fully separated from New South Wales. Similarly, most of the visual representations (and this is, of course, essentially a pre-photography event) appeared some years later. From the handful of extant eye-witness accounts, it appears much of the colony was affected, particularly in its western reaches. At least 5 million hectares were burnt — more than twice the area of the 2003-03 and 2006-07 Victorian fires combined and almost 35 times the area of Victoria affected in Ash Wednesday. Only 12 people were reportedly killed, although it has been suggested the death toll was much higher. Around 1 million sheep and thousands of cattle perished.<sup>26</sup>

Strutt created a number of smaller studies in preparing the main work, some of which are now held in various public collections. One episode that attracted his attention was the tale of a troupe of actors whose wagon was overcome by the flames. They managed to salvage no more than a cornet and a violin. Strutt recreated the incident in one of his studies, *The actor's cart, Black Thursday, February 6<sup>th</sup> 1851* (1863). The tragic-comic theatrical gesticulation of one figure in this small oil on paper also features in the main painting.<sup>27</sup>

The second thing to note about *Black Thursday* is its size. At just over one metre tall and 3.4 metres wide, it is a work of epic proportions. The art critic Robert Hughes is dismissive of this genre of "elephantine academism" and "bombastic history paintings", noting that while Black Thursday was much admired it had a "laborious *beau arts* finish", while conceding that Strutt was "of some interest" because he tried through his depiction of heroic or melancholy incident to typify the colonial pioneer. "Australians like local set-backs, like bushfires, floods or Anzac Day," notes Hughes, adding with a characteristically pompous flourish: "They serve as a substitute for history."<sup>28</sup>

Madeleine Say reflects in a recent study of the painting that Strutt considered *Black Thursday* his *magnum opus*. It used the Australian experience of fire, long removed from the European landscape, to produce a painting that was at once historical and instructional. Strutt planned for the painting to be held on public display, although it took some 90 years before it was purchased by the State Library of Victoria. Although lauded when it was first displayed in London, *Black Thursday* failed to find a buyer. An attempt by a consortium of ex-Victorian colonists to buy the painting for an Australian public collection lapsed in 1866 for want of interest. A further attempt to secure it on for the Victorian library failed in 1870. Strutt himself bemoaned its failure to find "an appropriate home".<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, *Black Thursday* was extensively exhibited to the public in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, attracting thousands of paying viewers. In England it was initially displayed at the Scandinavian Gallery, London in 1864, then at Crystal Palace, London and the Corn Exchange, Essex in 1866. After languishing in the artist's studio for almost 20 years, it was eventually sold to Adelaide art dealer E.J. Wivell for £260. Wivell displayed the painting publicly at his own gallery in Adelaide in 1883. It then went on display on a fee-per-view basis at the Athenaeum in Melbourne, at the Victorian Jubilee Exhibition in 1884 and the Royal Anglo-Australian Society of Artists in Sydney and Adelaide in 1890. In 1901, it was part of the Victorian Gold Jubilee Exhibition at the Public Library of Victoria. But despite being constantly on the market, there were no takers. A campaign to buy the painting for the South Australian Public

Library, Museum and Art Gallery also failed. Sometime between 1902 and 1912, it was sold into a private collection in Adelaide and removed from public view until 1954.<sup>30</sup> Yet there seems little question that the painting had “helped to impress on some English and many colonial minds the hostile aspect of nature in Australia”.<sup>31</sup>

Purchased for just over £220 by Victoria's public library, *Black Thursday* finally went on permanent public display a decade later in 1965 — more than a century after it was painted. In 1988, the painting went on the road for two years as part of the Bicentennial celebrations. During refurbishment of the State Library, it travelled widely: to Canberra, South Australia and Western Australia. In 2003 it was part of the *Bushfire — our community responds* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, before finally returning to the State Library of Victoria in 2004.<sup>32</sup>

In the absence of other notable contemporary renditions, Strutt's canvas became almost the sole visual reference point for the Black Thursday fires. It has been viewed widely by successive generations of Australians and, more recently, has been frequently reproduced in texts. Many contemporary artists, including Frederick McCubbin, were familiar with the painting and it appears to have influenced a number of later works. It is certainly the image most often associated with that event. The imagery of terrified colonists and their animals in full flight from the smudgy red-brown holocaust about to engulf them is a dramatic and affecting image. It captures the alien nature of the freshly conquered colonial landscape and epitomises the dangers that lurk there for the unwary. It is a deeply compositional painting: the *memento mori* of dead and dying animals are positioned to the front of the scene.

Strutt's biographer, Heather Curnow, described the scene in detail for a 1981 exhibition of the artist's works:

A dull, red, glowing sky occupies two thirds of the picture and a dense cloud of billowing black smoke cuts of visibility above the heads of the figures. Out of this smoke emerges what at first sight seems a confused mass of people and animals escaping the blaze, a ragged zigzag line of flight.<sup>33</sup>

But as Curnow points out, this disguises a highly organised composition in the style of the genre, owing much in its composition to Horace Vernet's<sup>34</sup> monumental *The capture of the Smala*. The artistic merit or otherwise of Strutt's enormous canvas has been the subject of some debate.

Bernard Smith highlighted Strutt's work in his seminal study of Australian painting published in 1962. He argued that *Black Thursday* was an attempt “to bring the elevation and dignity of history painting to a theme already well-established in colonial art and life”.<sup>35</sup> Others, such as Hughes, have been more dismissive. A recent study argues that the painting was as historical dramatisation deeply derivative of the French history painting tradition and filled with the religious symbolism found in many of the artist's later works.<sup>36</sup>

There is no question, however, that *Black Thursday* falls within what Tim Bonyhady has described as “art as information” in the context of colonial Australia.<sup>37</sup> This is not a romantic vision, but an instructional one. The central and most accessible message of Strutt's painting is, of course, flight. The explicit suggestion is that in the face of bushfire, the only sensible course of action is to flee. The painting on one level becomes an important visual cue as to appropriate behaviour in such circumstances. This is despite the obvious chaos and tumult of *Black Thursday*. In that sense it is an important and arguably enduring cultural cue, as relevant today as when it was painted and first exhibited. Strutt was much taken by bushfire as a theme. He painted a number of other minor bushfire works.<sup>38</sup>

Other artists evidently drew inspiration from Strutt's work. Leigh Astbury suggests that leading Heidelberg School artist Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917) drew on it for his painting *The North Wind* (1891), in particular the mother clinging to her child is anticipated in Strutt's work.<sup>39</sup> Frederick Woodhouse (1820-1909) was better known as the artistic chronicler of every Melbourne Cup winner from 1861 until 1888. The style and messages implicit in his *Fire and flight* (c.1875), which depicts stockmen frantically herding a mixture of cattle and horses away from an advancing bushfire, is deeply reminiscent of Strutt's *Black Thursday*, right down to the *memento mori* in the foreground. Similarly an illustration for Sutherland's *Victoria and its Metropolis* in 1888 by J. Davis owes much to Strutt's canvas.<sup>40</sup>

The second major 19<sup>th</sup> century work is Sir John Longstaff's *Gippsland, Sunday Night, Feb 20<sup>th</sup> 1898* (1898). This is

another physically imposing work. The canvas in oils measures almost 1.5 metres by 2 metres. Like von Guerard's fire painting, this is a scene of fire at night. It shows a group of settlers, miniscule against the backdrop of a giant mountain ash forest. Flames lick from the left of the canvas, the furore of the main fire front is part of the distant backdrop. The artist drew his inspiration for this scene from the 'Red Tuesday' fires in Gippsland that summer. Indeed, Longstaff and his artist friend Desbrowe Annear heard of the fires and "as neither was busy they went to Warragul to help fight the fires raging in the area".<sup>41</sup> Indeed, his visit was reported by a correspondent to the *Bulletin*, who noted that "Mr John Longstaff had gone down from Melbourne to view the conflagration and was much pleased with what he had seen".<sup>42</sup>

Unlike Strutt, Longstaff had no problem disposing of the canvas. *Gippsland, Sunday night* was immediately purchased by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1898 for £250. It was first shown at a private viewing in the Old Court Studio in Melbourne. The artist Louis McCubbin recalled being taken to see it as a young boy by his father, Frederick. By the time of this work, Longstaff was already an established painter. Indeed, by curious coincidence, the painting that had ensured his reputation was

*Breaking the news* (1887), another "disaster canvas" depicting the bringing of bad tidings after a mining accident. It had secured him a travelling scholarship to Europe and considerable fame. But rather than renown as a cataloguer of catastrophes or even a landscape painter, Longstaff is primarily noted as a portrait artist (including five Archibald Prizes) and as the first Australian painter to be knighted. Longstaff painted another Gippsland fires painting, which he kept for himself. It was exhibited in Melbourne in 1936.<sup>43</sup>

Like *Black Thursday*, Longstaff's painting has been widely exhibited and is familiar to generations of Australians, who have either seen it first-hand or in reproduction. The 1898 Gippsland fires — which killed 12 people, destroyed 2000 buildings and burned through 260,000 hectares — were followed by further broad scale fires in the region over the next decade. But if Strutt's image was an instructional one, Longstaff's presaged a different milieu, one that had more to do with romance and image-making.

Another familiar image to emerge from the 1898 fires was J.A. Turner's (1850-1908) *The homestead saved — an incident of the great Gippsland fire of 1898* (c.1898). Oft-reproduced, it was owned at the time of Turner's death by Henry Young (of Young & Jackson's Hotel) and reproduced in colour shortly thereafter as a supplement to *The Australasian*. Almost three-quarters of a century later, the original work consolidated Turner's reputation as a recorder of colonial life when sold at auction for \$82,000 in 1980.<sup>44</sup> Like the Strutt and Longstaff paintings, this too was a big canvas (90cm by 151cm). The painting depicts a group of men desperately fighting a bushfire as it encroaches upon a humble paling and shingle farm house, beside which a woman and children wait anxiously. Turner, a prolific artist, painted other bushfire scenes. *The bush fire* (1901), a work in oil on board, depicts a group of four men with boughs in their hands for beating out the fire, watching over a post-and-rail fence at a fire burning away in the scrub.<sup>45</sup> *A bushfire alarm* (c.1906) and *The enemy* (c.1890) were reproduced and widely sold as colour postcards (along with 45 other Turner works depicting rural and bush life)<sup>46</sup>. Born in Yorkshire, Turner arrived in Victoria in 1874. In 1888, he purchased a small rural property at Kilsyth in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne, so he was well-acquainted with the reality of bushfire. Upon his death, *The Argus* suggested that "no man has ever painted the realism of a forest fire and its fighting better", while one biographer suggests "bushfires were a subject he handled well, probably because he had seen them at first hand".<sup>47</sup>

Other artists were inspired by the Gippsland fires. Theo Brooke-Hansen (1870-1945) painted the melodramatic *Burnt out, an incident in the Gippsland bush fires in 1898* (1901). The painting shows a settler and his wife (or perhaps daughter) contemplating their future in front of a burnt out homestead deep in the forest. Naylor Gill (1873-1945) in *Bushfire, Gippsland* (1910) embraces Longstaff's idea of the diminutive human settler — in this case represented by the humble homestead — against a backdrop of giant trees and raging flames. It is, again like Longstaff's, a vision of fire at night. Held in a private collection, the painting has recently toured eastern Australia as part of the *Fireworks* exhibition.<sup>48</sup> Bushfire was a popular theme for Gill, although there is a sameness about his depictions.<sup>49</sup>

James Waltham Curtis (1839-1901) was a painter and illustrator who arrived in Victoria around the time of the gold

rushes and painted a number of bushfire works. Curtis was classically trained and like many of his contemporaries made a living by working for the illustrated press, where some of his bushfire pictures were reproduced. Curtis's *Black Thursday, February, 1851* (1888), for example, was drawn from imagination and published in David Syme's *Illustrated Australian News*.<sup>50</sup> Likewise *Track of the bushfire* (1879), a mournful vision of a burnt-out settler's home. Curtis's work is interesting on a number of levels. His vision of the landscape is a romantic one; essentially European but over the years adapting to the differences in both the light and vegetation, stopping short of the Impressionists' contemporaneous reinterpretation. The strength of his bushfire paintings is in their informative value as records of landscape. In *Bushfire* (1895), a group of stockmen struggle to shepherd animals out of the path of a fire advancing through heavily wooded countryside. *Escaping the blaze* (1895-6)<sup>51</sup> is a similarly conventional depiction of a stagecoach trying to outrun a fire in the forest. But *Fifteen months after a bushfire, Plenty Ranges, Victoria* (1899)<sup>52</sup> is a far more sophisticated work showing the recovery of the bush, right down to the epicormic growth characteristic of the eucalyptus after fire. Curtis evidently marvelled at the almost complete regeneration. At first sight, his interpretation shows little evidence of fire. In the distance the light colours of newly shooting crown growth complete the resilient vision, still startling to those unfamiliar with the power of the bush to regenerate after fire. Other works include *Fleeing from the bush fire* (1891)<sup>53</sup> and *Horses stampeding from a bushfire* (1893), *Approaching bushfire* (1884), *Bushfire and cattle* (1894).<sup>54</sup>

Other 19<sup>th</sup> century artists touched on the bushfire subject. Gladstone Eyre (1863-1933) typifies the struggle of traditionalists still wrestling with the depiction of fire in the landscape. His *Bushfire* (1900) has an almost European feel.<sup>55</sup> Charles Conder (1868-1909) personified bushfire as a femme fatale in his major Symbolist pictures *Victorian idyll* (since lost) and the recently rediscovered *Hot wind* (1889). Conder took the latter painting back with him to Europe in 1890 and it was last recorded by his biographer in 1914 before passing into the hands of an English relative and considered lost for almost a century. The painting depicts a "half draped female figure lying on the ground" blowing flames from a brazier across the plains to scorch the surrounding landscape. It was executed during the great Victorian drought of 1888-89, when the young artist had moved to Melbourne to join the Heidelberg School of impressionists. Conder considered *Hot Wind* as "the best work I have done".<sup>56</sup> In *Spirit of the bushfire* (1900), Sydney Long (1871-1955) painted an allegorical figure of a woman swirling a veil flames across the landscape.

From the 1850s until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, bushfires formed a staple subject matter of the colonial illustrated newspapers. A number of prominent artists and many lesser known practitioners produced depictions of bushfire for this medium or allowed engravers to reproduce their original work. Among them were Nicholas Chevalier (1828-1902) *The bush on fire* (1865); Eugene Montague Scott (1835-1909) *Squatting life in Victoria — a station on fire* (1867); Frederick Grosse (1828-94) *Bush fire* (1864) and Julian Ashton (1851-1942) *The destructive fire near Maryborough* (1881). All of these works were executed with the illustrated newspapers of the day in mind, often while the artists were in their employ.<sup>57</sup>

Art certainly suggested that bushfires were part of a broader mythology of the bush, another hardship to be endured as part of man's struggle to master a new environment. The catastrophes of Black Thursday in 1851 and, for the yeoman settler, the even more calamitous 1898 Gippsland fires were depicted in art in manner that echoed the writings of nationalists such as Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. Astbury suggests the bushfire theme was "swiftly incorporated into the pioneer mythology", one he maintains was rooted in the nostalgic dreams and yearnings of an urban-based society.<sup>58</sup> A problem with this analysis, however, is that the events being depicted by the artists were real rather than imaginary, to the point where the events themselves could be pinpointed. Certainly, some artists (such as Turner) were overtly romantic in their depiction of rural life, but that hardly diminished the terror and heartbreak that was conveyed in their bushfire paintings.

In an echo of the idyllic vision of von Guerard, the celebrated South Australian artist Hans Heysen (1877-1968) largely eschewed fire in his depictions of the Australian landscape. A notable exception is the oil and charcoal work *Approaching Storm with Bush Fire Haze* (1913)<sup>59</sup>, which captured "quite a dramatic moment I came across — just above Hahndorf, during the great bushfire in 1912 — which left me with a vivid memory".<sup>60</sup> The image is of farmers engaged in a desperate race to move stock away from the still distant advancing flames. Yet the painting itself is more focussed on the beauty of the colours the fire produces than the drama of the event itself.<sup>61</sup>

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists had largely moved away from depicting bushfire in either literal or romantic terms. The eclipse of the nationalistic Impressionist period saw many artists turning away from *plein-air* depictions of the landscape, with our without fire, to less romantic topics such as war and economic depression. The rise of Modernism in the 1920s and 1930s refocussed artists' attention and challenged the domination of Establishment conservatives and traditionalists.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, a number of prominent Realist, Neo-realist and Modernist artists have incorporated bushfire into their body of work. Sam Atyeo (1911-90) painted a wholly Abstract work entitled simply *Bushfire* (n.d.)<sup>63</sup>. Often artists were responding to their own involvement in fire events. Sidney Nolan (1917-92) painted *After the grassfire* (1944)<sup>64</sup> shortly after the army supply corps to which he was attached was called out to fight a fire near Dimboola on the Wimmera plains. It is a highly geometric vision of fire's aftermath, with blackened wedges interspersed between unburnt bush. Nolan described the fire as having "a volition of its own ... I was frightened in some way of the might".<sup>65</sup> Russell Drysdale (1912- 81) painted the desolation of a twisted aftermath of corrugated iron in *Bush fire* (1944) now held in the Queensland Art Gallery.<sup>66</sup> Joy Hester (1920-60) hastily began painting a watercolour — *Bushfire, Avonsleigh* (1955) — as the fire was bearing down upon the rural property east of Melbourne where she lived.<sup>67</sup> Weaver Hawkins (1893-1977) depicts a cubistic frenzy of fire and twisted trees in *Bushfire* (1960).<sup>68</sup> Others such as Marjorie Woolcock (1898-1998) continued to paint more recognisable landscapes. In *Bushfire, Mordialloc Creek* (1943)<sup>69</sup>, Woolcock depicted a grass fire in farmland, an unusual perspective in genre dominated by fire in the forest.

For Fred Williams (1927-82), one of the most celebrated of modern Australian painters, fire became a recurring and not altogether abstract theme in his work.<sup>70</sup> Williams lived at Upwey in the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne between 1963 and 1969. He painted local landscapes extensively, bringing to them his distinctive interpretations and in the process consolidating his place as one of the nation's foremost artists.<sup>71</sup> But it was a bushfire in February 1968 that fundamentally altered William's vision of the Australian landscape. The fire front was halted just 100 metres from Williams' home, where the artist had begun to pile up paintings on the lawn outside. Williams was both terrified and fascinated by the experience, likening it to "like being in the mid[st] of a war".<sup>72</sup> In the immediate aftermath, he went out and sketched and painted in situ in the surrounding burnt out landscape, even incorporating its charcoal and clay into his work. Over the following year, Williams produced a series of works that depicted fire in the landscape. He worked methodically, producing oil paintings, gouaches, drawings and prints. Patrick McCaughey gauges that the experience of the bushfire was so intense, that Williams determined it had to be quickly "exorcised once and for all".<sup>73</sup>

Fred Williams approached the fire series in an explicatory manner. The works are roughly divided into four groups: the fire itself, the burnt landscape, those dealing with a single burning tree and the fern diptych. These follow the fire from its approach, through the destruction wrought to the regeneration of the forest afterwards. He examines not just the forest as a whole, but the minutiae of its rebirth, depicting individual plants as well as sweeping landscapes.

The Upwey series was not the last (or for that matter the first) of Williams's bushfire paintings, but they certainly marked a turning point in his work that both the artist and subsequent commentators have acknowledged.<sup>74</sup> The sheer quantity of work (well over 100 pieces in total) makes them collectively one of the most detailed and significant representations of bushfire in Australian art history. This was not merely a painting, but art that represented a story of fire in the Australian landscape. One piece in particular, *Burnt landscape II* (1970) is considered the synthesis of all the fire paintings. It also represented a departure from William's "highly refined, almost monochromatic Australian Landscapes [series]".<sup>75</sup>

Williams aside, many modern non-indigenous Australian artists have struggled with fire in the landscape. Many depictions of bushfire remain infused with fear, or at least appalled by its consequences. Butler argues that modern indigenous artists continue to see fire as part of life continuum in a way that non-indigenous artists do not, but she is arguing from a limited sampling of works in the selective atmosphere of a single exhibition.<sup>76</sup> Clifton Pugh (1924-90) was one modern painter who came to a clear understanding the place of fire in the environment. He lived and worked in the bush on the outskirts of Melbourne, wrestling with issues of man's degradation of the bush and incorporating not just fire but other threats both to and from those surroundings into his work. Notable paintings include *Forest fire* (c. 1958), which depicts a horse writhing in fear in the midst of a bushfire, and *After the bush fire* (c.1958), a more



whimsical work in which goats graze on the new shoots in the blackened bush.<sup>77</sup> But the core of Pugh's bushfire art is the material prepared of Ivan Smith's *The Death of a Wombat*,<sup>78</sup> which captures the cycle of life and death in the natural world associated with fire. *Aftermath of Fire* (1965), a triptych executed in oil with the help of an oxyacetylene torch, is considered by some to be one of Pugh's best works.<sup>79</sup>

The prevailing tenor of the modern artistic vision of bushfire is a responsive or reactive one. There is less utilitarian description and much more emphasis on *after* the fire, as in John Perceval's (1923- 2000) oil on board *After the bushfire* (1957), while his friend and contemporary Laurence Hope (b.1928) depicts raging flames in *Bushfire* (1957). Rick Amor's (b.1948) *The Arc - aftermath of bushfires in the North East* (2003) and another study, *Untitled (bushfire)* (2003) typify the deep dread of a blackened aftermath, of scorched and blackened wilderness which at first sight offers no hope. David Larwill (b.1956) captured both the terror and chaos of the fires in his bold red-and-black canvas *Ash Wednesday* (1983)<sup>80</sup>.

Modern painters to depart from such bleak depictions of fire are Alison Rehfisch (1900-75), Desiderius Orban (1884-1986) and William Boissevain (b.1927). Rehfisch and Orban, both Sydney artists, depict bushfire "saves": homes that have been threatened but not lost. In marked contrast to the gloomy, blackened landscapes of Amor and others, Rehfisch's *Landscape after the fire* (1945)<sup>81</sup> is a bright and colourful rendition, in which the burnt area is more a scorched brown than charcoal black. Orban's painting *After bushfires* (n.d.)<sup>82</sup> depicts the aftermath of a fire at Lawson in the Blue Mountains, framing a surviving home in an arch of blackened trees and bush. Boissevain, a Perth artist, paints fire as part of a rich and colourful landscape. John Coburn (b.1925) has used bushfire as a theme for a rich and colourful tapestry, *Bushfire* (n.d.)<sup>83</sup> Yvonne Audette (b.1930), a sometime student of Orban who became one of Australia's most accomplished abstract painters, has executed a number of works "about the greatest hazard of Australia's eucalypt bushland". These include *Bushfire* (1979), *Burnt tree* (1975-76) and *Moving symbols no.4 as seen in a burnt landscape* (1995-98).<sup>84</sup>

Another prominent contemporary non-Aboriginal artist to generate a significant body of bushfire work is John Wolseley (b.1938). In his solo exhibition 'The Memory of Fire' (2003)<sup>85</sup> he documented the cycle of bushfire from ignition to regeneration. Much of Wolseley's work draws on the Christmas 2001 fires in the Royal National Park south of Sydney.<sup>86</sup> Wolseley, like Pugh, has a strong attachment to the landscape: "The job of the artist is to talk about those underlying cycles of regeneration; people are losing the ability to make connections with what is actually around them."<sup>87</sup>

Aside from the individual responses of artists, there have sometimes been institutional reactions to bushfire. Severe fires, particularly in recent years have prompted exhibitions and similar events which have particularly involved artists in the recovery process after the event. The 'Bushfire, Our Community Responds' exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria from March to July 2003 was a direct response to the Victorian Alpine fires that were extinguished barely a month earlier year. It showcased several of the major 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century fire artworks referred to in this chapter.<sup>88</sup> The exhibition was conceived as a fund raiser, with entry by donation. Money raised from this and the sale of catalogues was contributed to the Victorian Bushfire Recovery Fund.<sup>89</sup>

The travelling exhibition 'Fireworks', which traversed the eastern mainland states from March 2005 until the end of 2006, was not prompted by a specific fire event, but certainly responded to them along the way. By the time it reached Ballarat in July 2006, the exhibition had acquired an "Epilogue" — consisting of pieces offered by artists Mark Schaller (b.1962), Murray Walker (b.1937) and Peter Walsh (b.1958). This addendum draws on recent fires in the nearby Grampians National Park and surrounding areas. An exhibition of art inspired by the Canberra fires of 2003 was staged at the Historic Canberra Fire Museum in June 2006.<sup>90</sup> The Eyre Peninsula fire in South Australia in January 2005 led to an exhibition entitled 'Burning Issues', which went on display in Port Adelaide in June-July 2006, and was scheduled to tour state-wide in 2007.<sup>91</sup> Often such events play an important role in community recovery after a major fire:

*Burning Issues* is an extension of this rebuilding for the artists involved and for the wider community and demonstrates the role the arts can play in building communities, recording experiences, and celebrating

the human spirit. 92

Similarly, following the 2003 Alpine fires, the Benalla Art Gallery commissioned *The Arc - aftermath of bushfires in the North East* (2003) by Rick Amor.<sup>93</sup>

Sometimes, the responses of artists to bushfire tend to be spontaneous, even irreverent. Michael Leunig (b.1945) is best known for his whimsical, brooding and often deeply political cartoons. Bushfire has been an occasional subject for Leunig since the 1970s; more recently the subject matter has been literally closer to home since he returned to live in rural Victoria. Leunig is himself experienced as a volunteer with a local brigade, but long before this drew the tale of the Bark Flat Fire Brigade, which manages to save just the circle of grass immediately around its fire truck as the main front disappears across the otherwise blackened horizon.<sup>94</sup> Australians, Leunig believes, struggle to find ways to express their relationship with fire, partly because of bushfire's enormity. "It just seems a bit unreal for those who experience it. Perhaps there are no reference points."<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

There are many different ways of seeing bushfire beyond the pragmatic needs of an operational response or scientific inquiry. The significance of depictions of bushfire in the visual arts has largely been underestimated in Australia. The presence of the bushfire theme has been partially documented, but not so the impact of the images upon the Australian imagination. The volume of paintings, drawings and other visual representations of fire beg the question: how much have these shaped people's reactions and responses to fire in the landscape over the past two centuries? Which beliefs about fire are rooted in the imagery of the 19<sup>th</sup> century passed on down into the collective psyche of 21<sup>st</sup> century Australians? Ultimately, how do the beliefs stimulated by art filter down into the actions taken by Australians faced with the threat of bushfire?

Flight as an appropriate response in the face of fire is the unmistakable message of Strutt's *Black Thursday*. It is an understanding reinforced by a number of 19<sup>th</sup> century works. Even in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Hester continues to espouse the same route. Other artists, such as Turner in *The homestead saved*, suggest an alternative course of action was already being considered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but they seem to be in the minority. Interestingly, Turner was a rural-based artist, while many other depictions were painted by city artists.

The notion of helplessness is reiterated in Longstaff's *Gippsland, Sunday Night, Feb 20<sup>th</sup>, 1898*. A family is shown dwarfed by both the giant mountain ash forest and the fire that is burning through it towards their humble homestead, while a horseman appears to urge them to leave. Again, the theme of helplessness persists well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the work of artists including Nolan and Drysdale.

The vision of desolation that emerges in Australia's bushfire art in the aftermath of fire is one picked up by Brook-Hansen and Curtis in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Drysdale pursues it in the 20<sup>th</sup> and Amor in the 21<sup>st</sup>. One of the few artists to approach fire from the perspective of renewal and regeneration is John Wolseley.

The extent to which bushfire is reflected in the Australian artistic tradition is apparent in the number artists across a divergent range of styles who have contributed to it. Defining the extent of the impact of this upon community understanding is a more difficult proposition. It is, however, reasonable to conclude that the visual arts along with other cultural artefacts such as literature and film have assisted Australians to define their understandings of fire and added to the complex mosaic of understandings that ultimately determine people's actions and responses to bushfire.

## Acknowledgments

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