

Picturesque Farming

The Sound of 'Happy Britannia' in Colonial Australia

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In 1832, James Bischoff waxed lyrically on the capabilities and improvements of the newly appropriated lands of Tasmania. Largely because of the emigration of free settlers from England, he asserted, these lands, 'which had recently been the range of the kangaroo, and the hunting ground of the wretched savage', were beginning to display the beneficial signs of 'industry and capital', as forests were brought under the plough and filled with livestock. So dramatic had been the transformation, he continued, that much of the island now resembled the cultivated countryside memorialised in John Dyer's mid eighteenth-century poem, *The Fleece*, a poem set in Herefordshire, the British county most frequently celebrated as the embodiment of Happy Britannia, a mythical land of peace and prosperity.¹ For a number of reasons, the allusion was as apt as it was inappropriate. It was apt because, in line with the interests of elite Tasmanian society, Dyer's poem put the pastoral industry in the service of empire, charting the process by which a global trade in wool products led to the spread of British dominion overseas. At the same time, it was inappropriate because well before the colonisation of Tasmania *The Fleece* had lost favour among the polite in Britain, partly as a consequence of the new picturesque preference for

uncultivated countryside—it suffered in the opinion of Samuel Johnson, for example, from the ‘meanness naturally adhering ... to trade and agriculture’.² More importantly for the purpose of this essay, however, the allusion to *The Fleece* is revealing in the sense that Dyer’s poem articulated two contradictory attitudes to the land and its society. On the one hand, it imagined the countryside as an arena made meaningful by the noise of human activity, especially the blend of collective labour and leisure which characterised peak periods of the rural seasonal calendar. Whereas Italy, the poet wrote, was a land of ‘solemn silence’, Britain was a place where valleys echoed with the sound of pipes, laughter, ‘gibes’ and ‘lusty merriment’.³ But on the other hand, *The Fleece* also gave expression to what, by the late eighteenth century, had certainly become the dominant ideal of the rural environment as a quiet place, a place prized above all for its visible appearance, whether that appearance connoted utilitarian order or picturesque irregularity.

As numerous scholars have noted, colonial perceptions of the Australian natural environment were informed by a predominantly British landscape aesthetic, which triumphed in the late eighteenth century.⁴ This tendency to evaluate the natural scenery of Australia in terms of a European idea of landscape took a number of forms: it could be appreciated for its distinctiveness, or what commentators usually referred to as its ‘novelty’; it could be found to resemble or even to surpass the examples of natural beauty and sublimity in Britain; or, as is well known, it could be found seriously wanting on the basis of its evergreen foliage. In the opinion of Barron Field, this latter characteristic meant that Australia lacked the central aesthetic criterion of variety, making it an ‘unpicturesque’ country without a ‘single scene ... of which a painter could make a landscape, without greatly disguising the true character of the trees’.⁵ Similarly, for the convict artist Thomas Watling, Australia was a land without a landscape, though a selective view of the country, he added, might just manage to conceal its unpleasant ‘sameness’.⁶ Needless to say, this kind of selective vision was always implicit in the concept of landscape, presupposing, as it did, the ability of a spectator to shape and rearrange the land, to see it from a particular point of view—usually an elevated vantage point. Accordingly, numerous critics have shown how British landscape conventions enabled settlers to identify with, control and ultimately take possession of the colonial environment. As Jeffrey Auerbach has noted, picturesque landscape taste

played a crucial role in empire building, not only helping to advance the colonisation of Australia, but conferring a degree of prestige on settlers who, back in Britain, suffered from a lack of social status or recognition.⁷ More recently, however, it has been argued by Tim Bonyhady and others that many of these conventions also gave birth to a less instrumental attitude to nature.⁸ From this perspective, it is claimed that an early conservationist sensibility was fertilised by the aesthetic theory of the picturesque, including the tendency to see an affinity between certain kinds of Australian natural scenery and an English landscape park.

Nevertheless, there is little recognition that the British landscape tradition determined not only how the colonial elite in Australia thought the land should look, but also how it should sound. In a pioneering study, Diane Collins has recently examined the complex range of meanings that early explorers attached to the acoustic environment, as they responded to an unfamiliar soundscape without any of the reassuring keynotes, which defined the culture of the contemporary British countryside.⁹ And, in a wide-ranging if rather theoretical analysis, Jane Belfrage has argued that colonisation was aided by a visually oriented print culture, which emphasised the silence of the Australian environment and its Indigenous inhabitants, imagined as passive, feminised and without communicative power.¹⁰ Yet scholars have overlooked the role the interaction of sound and vision played in colonial encounters with the land, even though such encounters took place in the immediate aftermath of the emergence of picturesque landscape taste.

This essay constitutes an attempt to begin to rectify this deficiency in our understanding. It begins by providing an outline of the process by which the development of picturesque landscape taste in eighteenth-century Britain coincided with a shift from an acoustic to a visual mode of knowing and valuing the land and its society, leading to a change in the dominant image of the countryside, from noisy to quiet. It then looks briefly at the way this shift was complicated when the British landscape aesthetic was exported to early colonial Australia. The essay concludes with an analysis of several textual and visual representations of the Australian rural environment produced during the 1820s and 1830s. These analyses show how colonial uses of picturesque landscape taste shaped contemporary perceptions of soundscape, attributing enormous value to the quietness of nature in a manner that aided its appropriation and exploitation.

I should emphasise at the outset that this essay does not pretend to offer an authoritative account of the colonial picturesque soundscape. In fact, as we shall see, the phrase ‘picturesque soundscape’ might be regarded as something of an oxymoron, since, at least for leading exponents of the theory in late eighteenth-century Britain, ‘picturesque’ referred only to a notion of how the land should look and be viewed, not to how it should sound or be heard. But artists and tourists who went searching for picturesque views could hardly switch off their non-visual senses, whether they travelled around the Lake District in England or down the Derwent River in Tasmania, though many expressed a desire to do so.¹¹ And tourists, especially, were far less purist in their understanding and use of ‘picturesque’ than aesthetic theorists, giving the word the imprecise meaning that it retains today. Invariably, therefore, picturesque taste did become associated with a kind of soundscape, characterised by the acoustic phenomena that might typically be experienced in suitably picturesque rural environments—stock keynotes included the gurgling of a river, the gentle whirring of the wind, the distant lowing of cattle and the singing of birds. A comprehensive account of the picturesque soundscape might justifiably be expected to delineate these acoustic phenomena and examine how they were perceived and interpreted by contemporaries, whose fondness for nature was influenced by the picturesque.

But this is not the purpose of this essay. What interests me is the way picturesque landscape taste precluded any positive valuation of loud sound, especially human-produced noise. For tourists no less than aesthetic theorists, noise utterly spoilt a picturesque landscape, not least because it made concentration impossible, preventing spectators from appreciating the formal, aesthetic qualities of a scene. Accordingly, quietness was regarded as the precondition of a picturesque natural environment, and the picturesque scene *par excellence* was one characterised by silence. While many sorts of faint or unobtrusive natural sound might be conducive to a picturesque view, to a large extent this was only the case insofar as they could be ignored or, at the very least, heard as muted ‘background music’ so as not to interfere with the act of contemplation. Such sound could therefore be regarded as an appropriate accompaniment to a quiet, or even (paradoxically) to a silent, natural scene. This helps to explain the frequent complaint about the noise of Australian wildlife by early white colonists, as when

Thomas Watling expressed his loathing of the relentless ‘clamor’ of frogs, reptiles and insects, which made his new environment a source of aesthetic disgust.¹² But whereas certain forms of restrained natural sound might be amenable to picturesque taste, no value whatsoever was attributed to the sound of collective human activity. Such sound was heard as undesirable noise, and it was regarded as out of place in a picturesque landscape. For the cult of the picturesque constituted a rejection of the long-established preference for populated and cultivated rural environments, and this destroyed the notion that nature was enhanced rather than diminished by the production of social noise. As one example of the new interest in primitivism, it sought in nature a refuge from the noise of human society and from the evils often associated with the advent of modernity. Ideally, nature thus became something to be cherished for its silence, solitude and lack of cultivation. This was in sharp contrast, as we shall see in a moment, to the earlier ideal of rural life, wherein the noise of human activity was a cause of patriotic celebration, a phenomenon animating and transforming nature into culture. This essay shows how such an ideal, which in late eighteenth-century Britain was displaced by picturesque landscape taste, was in colonial Australia combined with it, creating all sorts of social and aesthetic problems and illustrating the ambiguities of empire.

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As I have indicated, the first half of the eighteenth century in Britain witnessed the survival of a way of imagining the land as a soundscape, which attached considerable value to the production of social noise in the countryside.¹³ This is brilliantly exemplified in *Countryside Around Dixton Manor*, a portrayal of the hay harvest painted around the 1730s by an unknown and untrained artist (Figure 1, below).¹⁴ The painting depicts the harvest as a bustling, communal event, involving the participation of a vast number of workers, who perform an array of different activities. These workers, male and female, have left the quietness of their individual cottages, and the entire village has congregated on the harvest field to engage in the noise of industry. Cart wheels rattle, whips crack, feet thud on the ground, scythes crunch through the hay, and a polyglot of voices and sighs no doubt accompany the performance of the various tasks. But the land is not conceived simply as a productive resource, a hostile object to be conquered by an army of wage labourers.

For the clear importance assigned to physical recreation acts as a brake on agricultural improvement, and a number of harvest workers enjoy intervals of rest and play. Most notably, while two labourers lean against a corner fence, chatting instead of toiling, a group of nearby Morris dancers, bells on socks and banners in hands, parade out of the field to celebrate the end of the harvest (Figure 2, below). Elsewhere in the painting, a piper leads another group of haymakers in a different dance, all marching in time through some half-composed haystacks. The result is an image of the British countryside animated by noise, with a combination of collective labour and leisure signifying the health of a prosperous and vigorous polity.¹⁵

The point seems to be confirmed as the painting offers a prototypical image of what John Barrell has identified as the georgic myth of Happy Britannia, a land pulsating with 'busy joy-resounding fields', to quote James Thomson, the major landscape poet of the period.¹⁶ For georgic poets, the noise of the countryside was a powerful symbol of the greatness of Britain, especially of the populousness that was thought to be a 'Sign or Effect of a Country's thriving'.¹⁷ But the production of noise was equally associated with the qualities of the population, not just its size, density or growth. For Thomson's contemporary William Somerville, for example, the loud 'clamour', or 'harmonious Din', of the hunt was an expression of the martial spirit of the gentry,¹⁸ while raucous sports, customs and rural festivals were heard by the



Figure 1: Anon, *Countryside Around Dixton Manor*, c. 1730, oil on canvas, 106.8 x 288 cm
(Courtesy: Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, Gloucestershire)

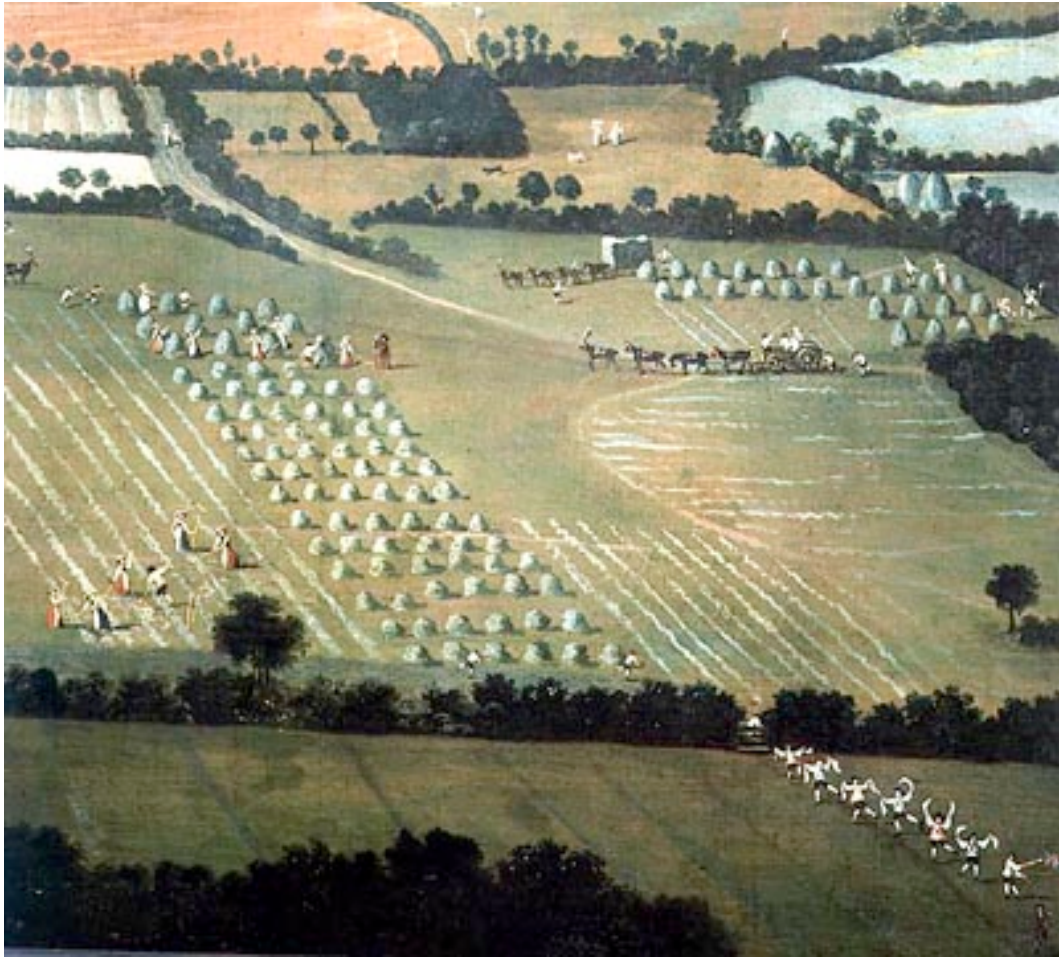


Figure 2: *Countryside Around Dixton Manor*, detail
(Courtesy: Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum, Gloucestershire)

same writer as a source of the contentment and hardihood of the poor. But the most pervasive image of the noise of the countryside was the harvest. For this central event in the rural calendar enabled swarms of agricultural workers to be depicted enjoying the recreation supposedly conducive to the nation's cohesiveness as well as performing the industrious labour necessary for increasing its prosperity. Thus, as Britain was represented as the 'Granary of the Western World'¹⁹ a major European power exporting raw produce across the globe, the harvest field was fancifully described, in the words of Thomson again, resounding with the 'voice | Of happy labour, love and social glee'.²⁰

By the end of the eighteenth century the dominant image of the land and its society in polite culture had changed radically, from noisy to quiet, acoustic to

visual.²¹ One aspect of the shift can be seen if we compare *Dixton Manor* to George Stubbs's *Haymakers*, painted in 1785 and exhibited one year later at the Royal Academy (Figure 3, below).²² The harvest workers here seem to perform their labour without any energy—they are caught in freeze-frame, and this lack of movement seems to imbue them with a decorum befitting the tranquillity of the surrounding rural scene. Only the woman in the centre feels free to stop working, yet her stately pose suggests that she, like the others, is conscious of being observed. In all these ways, the labourers reflect the newly dominant ideal of the good poor as, to quote William Cowper, writing in the year that Stubbs completed his painting, 'industrious, modest, quiet, neat'.²³ The result is an image of a disciplined workforce in a silent landscape, clearly seen from the perspective of the agricultural improvement lobby—or, indeed, from the point of view of the contemporary poet, James Hurdis, who liked to observe the 'effects | Of unabated labour' from behind his study window. In his poem 'The Village Curate', published in 1787, Hurdis hoped never to hear the shouting and general noise-making, the 'sound of joy', which accompanied the end of the harvest, though it is unclear whether his particular dislike was for the idleness of the agricultural workers or the boisterous character of their leisure.²⁴



Figure 3: George Stubbs, *Haymakers*, 1785, oil on wood, 89.5 x 135.3 cm
(Courtesy: Tate Images © Tate Gallery, London)

This new insistence on a silent landscape was clearly connected to the proprietorial attitude to nature ushered in by various forms of agricultural improvement. Enclosure, for example, was often praised for making the countryside quiet as well as orderly. The dense network of customary rights and responsibilities, it was argued, caused conflict rather than cooperation, idleness rather than industry. As one clergyman wrote of his own parish in Northamptonshire, the pre-enclosed village was characterised by cursing, grumbling and 'bitter speech', while the fields resounded with 'ear-piercing cries', evidence of the apparent savagery of the common-field system.²⁵ This attack on rural plebeian noise was related to a growing tendency to define the land by its visible properties rather than its collective social activities. In fact, the elevation of sight over sound was a central component of the ideology of agricultural improvement, with enclosure seeking to make the rural environment conform to an exclusively visual idea of order. 'The first object of our attention shall be the shape, size, and cloathing of arable fields,' wrote Thomas Ruggles in 'Picturesque Farming', a series of essays on the beauty of such a utilitarian countryside, which also condemned the 'idleness' of rural labourers.²⁶ For pro-improvement writers like Ruggles, an enclosed landscape was as beautiful as it was productive, while the noisy communality of the poor was regarded as a violation of taste as well as an obstacle to industry.

If there was still a segment of the polite public who found beauty in an improved agricultural landscape, the cult of the picturesque had led to a profound dissociation between utility and taste; and yet this reinforced the prevailing preference for a quiet countryside apprehended in solely visual terms, whether river, woodland or mountain scenery. As William Gilpin made clear during his tour of the Wye, published in 1782, to enjoy the 'solitary, tranquil scene' of Tintern Abbey, it was necessary to remain out of earshot of the 'noise and bustle' of nearby industrial activity.²⁷ From a comment such as this, it is evident that the silencing of landscape was very much part of a response to industrialisation, as the country increasingly came to be regarded as quiet as it increasingly came to be seen as a refuge from the ever-growing noise of the city. But the consequent taste for the quietness of nature led equally to a devaluation of the sound of much collective rural activity, which Gilpin accordingly defined as unworthy of the lover of the picturesque. Following the lead of Gilpin, the picturesque placed enormous

emphasis on obtaining the correct viewing station necessary for seeing the land as if it were a painting; and for the land to resemble a picture, to be picturesque, by definition it had to be silent. This was one of the great advantages of the high viewpoint, for from such a distance not only could the landscape be spread out in a kind of panoramic prospect, but also the viewer could be removed from the sound of the countryside below. Thus, upon reaching the summit of Lewesdon Hill in 1788 William Crowe delighted in lifting himself 'Above the noise and stir of yonder fields', from which 'proud eminence' an 'unbroken prospect' opened to his 'view', a vast, silent view, analogous, he claimed, to his own expansive mind.²⁸

The reasons for this growing distaste of noise in polite culture in late eighteenth-century Britain are too many, too complex and too contradictory to be adequately addressed in a small comparative essay of this sort. But it is perhaps worth emphasising that standards of politeness at the beginning of the century were still in flux, and often regarded with suspicion by some members of the patriciate, whose prejudices exerted a powerful influence over literary and artistic production. In particular, the aristocratic fondness for warlike activity ensured there remained a degree of tolerance for any kind of noise that suggested bellicosity, vigour and aggressive masculinity. By the end of the century, however, the middle classes, both male and female, were also laying claim to polite social identities, and paintings, poems, tour guides, aesthetic theories and myriad other forms of cultural production began to reflect their values, biases and interests.²⁹ One result of this was that politeness was increasingly used to differentiate the refined middle classes from the uncivilised masses, with the quiet, intellectual pursuits of the former being contrasted with the unruly or alienating noise associated with the latter. An appreciation of natural scenery was one among many such intellectual, recreational pursuits, a quality believed to be beyond the capacity of plebeian men and women.³⁰ Accordingly, the countryside came to be valued as a place of quietness, and the paradox emerged that it became possible to demonstrate a polite sensibility by engaging in the contemplation of an uncultivated rural environment. To some extent, this alteration in the meaning of politeness was in active conflict with the contemporary celebration of Britain as an industrialising nation at the centre of a vast, commercial empire. And it is true that, well into the nineteenth century, the noise of commerce, of industry and of empire was regarded as a positive

phenomenon in many contexts. But precisely because the countryside was seen as a refuge from rather than a driver of modernity, this reinforced the polite taste for quiet natural scenery. At least it did so in Britain. In colonial Australia, by contrast, where standards of politeness were used in novel ways to justify racial hierarchies and to bring order to confused social arrangements, there remained a taste, however muted and compromised, for a countryside pulsating with noise, especially the noise of empire.

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By the late eighteenth century in Britain, then, a silent landscape was perceived, if cultivated country, to be a sign of civilisation; or, if wild nature, to be an object of contemplation, the proper visual appreciation of which demonstrated the civilised state, the taste and even the humanity, of the spectator. In light of this situation, it might be supposed that when the early colonists brought this aesthetic to Australia, they would have sought to impose on the local terrain the quiet, visual countryside of the British imagination. And so, to an extent, they did. Taking a panoramic survey of the land around Adelaide in the late 1840s, Charles Sturt found that several of the new communities that had sprung up, ‘embosomed in trees, and picturesque in scenery’, bore ‘a strong resemblance to the quiet and secluded villages of England’.³¹ But initially, what was universally perceived as the silence of the Australian landscape was regarded with thoroughgoing ambivalence, as likely to produce alienation and disgust as aesthetic pleasure; likewise, the image of a land animated by noise was just as frequently associated with the advance of civilisation as it was perceived to be uncivilised.

From the beginning, elite colonial culture seems to have witnessed a revaluation of the very kind of human-produced noise, which had so thoroughly been expelled from the dominant image of British landscape: the noise of work. There was nothing benign about this vision. For it was clearly articulated in the interests of empire, and worked on the assumption that the land held no value without labour, that it was still, in fact, in a state of nature, empty, formless and available for possession. In an early account of New South Wales, for example, David Collins, the first judge-advocate of the colony, interpreted the landing at Port Jackson as a monumental, if not particularly dignified, moment in the advance of

civilisation. According to Collins, in an influential passage that would be cited repeatedly in later colonial writings, the encounter was marked by a dramatic shift in the acoustic profile of the land, changing a hitherto silent environment into a site of industrious noise:

The spot chosen ... was at the head of the Cove near a run of fresh water, which stole silently through a very thick wood, the stillness of which had then, for the first time since the creation, been interrupted by the rude sound of the labourer's axe, and the downfall of its ancient inhabitants:—a stillness and tranquillity which, from that day, were to give place to the noise of labour, the confusion of camps and towns, and the busy hum of its new possessors.³²

And then, as if embarrassed by this association between 'confusion' and progress, he justifies the remark a page later:

The confusion that ensues will not be wondered at, when it is considered, that every man stepped from the boat literally into a wood. Parties of people were every where heard and seen variously employed ... and the spot which had so lately been the abode of silence and tranquillity was now changed to that of noise, clamour, and confusion: but after a time, order gradually prevailed. As the woods were opened and the ground cleared, the various encampments were extended, and all wore the appearance of regularity and decorum.³³

This description of a land, previously characterised by a kind of primitive silence, giving way to the noise of civilisation was not at all original, having long been a stock trope in portrayals of European contact with the New World. It had recently been deployed, for instance, by George Forster to depict the improvement that the members of Cook's second voyage had wrought on the exotic landscape of Dusky Bay in New Zealand; for Forster, as for Collins, such improvement was proof, he wrote, of the 'superiority of a state of civilisation over that of barbarism'.³⁴ What is intriguing about Collins's version of the trope, however, is the ambivalence which results from his attempt to celebrate a phenomenon otherwise offensive to his social no less than his aesthetic priorities—his sense of order no less than his idea of beauty. The apparently silent, wooded landscape clearly holds more value as an aesthetic object than the populated settlement and, from this perspective, the noise

of labour is classified as 'rude', as if the agent of refinement is itself unrefined. From confusion order prevails, but such order is conceived in emphatically visual terms. After a temporary interruption, Collins suggests, the land can begin to resemble a landscape, for the land can only have an appearance of regularity and decorum once it is opened to view. As Arthur Phillip wrote in a similar description of the colonisation of what he referred to as a 'savage coast', 'the bustle of various hands busily employed in a number of the most incongruous works, increases rather than diminishes the disorder' of the 'wild', uncultivated, 'promiscuous' terrain. 'But by degrees large spaces are opened, plans are formed, lines are marked, and a prospect at least of future regularity is clearly discerned.'³⁵

There can be no mistaking the tension between noise and silence in these early forms of Australian landscape description. But the same tension appears to have become particularly pronounced during the 1820s and 1830s when the expansion of large-scale pastoral activity, coupled with the attempt to promote the emigration of propertied settlers, produced an image of Australia not just as a 'new Britannia', but a kind of Happy Britannia, 'in another world'. The line, of course, is from *Australasia* by William Wentworth, a colonial version of Thomson's *Seasons* in which the poet foretells a future when the 'mute', 'stunted woods' of this 'new Arcadia' would resound with the 'joyous sound' of swarms of 'noisy' rural workers.³⁶ It is as if the Australian environment is not only hostile to sociality, but an affront to nature itself; for nature is 'stunted' as well as 'mute', unable to realise its true self without the intervention of European man. Needless to say, this was a frankly utilitarian aesthetic, though such an aesthetic may have paradoxically facilitated a control of the land that strengthened rather than weakened the taste for the picturesque.³⁷

Perhaps no one expressed this contradictory attitude more clearly than Robert Dawson, whose apparent enthusiasm for picturesque scenery was evidently at odds with his role as Chief Agent of the Australian Agricultural Company. Of a 'fine extent of unoccupied meadow' west of Port Stephens, Dawson exclaimed, 'I could not help contrasting its serenity and profound quietness ... with what I felt it would so soon become through my own instrumentality, when its untrodden surface would be trampled by the feet of grazing herds, and its tranquillity destroyed by the presence, and too probably by the noisy contentions of men.'³⁸ For James Atkinson, in contrast, there was no redeeming feature in the extensive, uncultivated plains in the interior

of the colony. Far from being conducive to contemplation, this silent environment connoted sterility and bleakness, dispiriting rather than uplifting the self and threatening to contract rather than expand the mind. 'The silence and solitude that reign in these wide spreading, untenanted wastes, are indescribable', he wrote:

no traces of the works or even the existence of man are here to be met with, except perhaps the ashes of a fire on the banks of some river ... From the contemplation of this vacancy and solitude the mind recoils with weariness, and naturally turns with pleasure to some future and not distant period, when these vast and in many places fertile plains, shall be covered by productive flocks and herds, and enlivened by the presence and industry of civilized man.³⁹

The assumption underlying this perception and subsequent rejection of silence was that nature was inert and bore no mark of meaningful human activity, a claim which justified the appropriation of the land no less than its exploitation.

And yet this preoccupation with the silence of Australian landscape came into active conflict with what was often represented, drawing on an age-old prejudice recently codified by Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, as the brutish noise of Aboriginal people. 'What a cheering prospect', exclaimed Wentworth:

to behold what is now one vast and mournful wilderness, becoming the smiling seat of industry and the social arts; to see its hills and dales covered with bleating flocks, lowing herds, and waving corn; to hear the joyful notes of the shepherd, and the enlivening cries of the husbandman, instead of the appalling yell of the savage, and the plaintive howl of the wolf; and to witness a country which nature seems to have designed as her master-piece, at length fulfilling the gracious intentions of its all-bounteous Author, by administering to the wants and contributing to the happiness of millions.⁴⁰

There was thus a hierarchy established in the colonial imagination with the noise of industrious European labour positioned well above the noise of Aboriginal activity. What was often categorised as the inchoate noise of Indigenous people was frequently associated with a disposition towards idleness and ferocity, the latter implying an inability to regulate passion into reason and the former suggesting a failure to convert land into property.

Of course, things were not this simple, and the distant sound of Aborigines sometimes provided explorers with welcome relief from the silence of an environment they found threatening in the extreme.⁴¹ Although in the 1830s, Thomas Mitchell generally found the noise of Indigenous people even more menacing than the oppressive silence of their land, he noted at one point on the banks of the Darling that the 'buzz of population gave ... this place the cheerful character of a village in a populous country.' But on the same day, he revealingly wrote that his party trusted 'on the surrounding silence for security.'⁴² And it is clear that Mitchell, along with John Oxley a decade or so earlier, felt more comfortable seeing rather than hearing signs of Indigenous life from the kind of remote vantage point needed to contemplate the land as landscape.⁴³ Taking a 'most extensive and beautiful' prospect from a hill about eighty miles north of Bathurst, Oxley was highly gratified by a 'landscape ... resembling diversified pleasure grounds irregularly laid out', the 'scenery' of which was 'greatly increased', he wrote, 'by the smoke of the natives' fires arising in every quarter'.⁴⁴ Such a view was satisfying not only because it demonstrated the productive potential of the land, but also because it evidently quarantined the observer from the sound of Aboriginal culture, producing a vision of landscape more pleasing for its silence.

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In these ways, the British landscape aesthetic inherited by explorers and other colonists made it difficult to represent human-produced noise in unequivocally positive terms. It is significant in this context that the image of a land resounding with the bustle of human activity was mostly located in the future; when commentators praised an actually cultivated region, they emphasised the visual signs of settlement: smoking chimneys, gardens or, as Mitchell observed, the 'charming' 'symmetrical appearance' of 'stock-yard' fences.⁴⁵ Partly this was a function of the tendency to evaluate the natural environment according to pictorial criteria, to see the land as a landscape painting. For it was a convention of landscape painting that human figures had to be subordinated to the grandeur or beauty of the landscape they inhabited, with the result that only solitary or small groups of people were to be permitted into a scene. As a consequence, to perceive the actual land as a picture, as so many colonists strived to do, the collective human activity likely to

produce noise or commotion had to be removed from the area under observation—or, at least, located in the distance so as to blend into the surrounding landscape.

Similarly, for all the apparent enthusiasm for transforming colonial Australia into a new Happy Britannia, perhaps only the anonymous, *Happe Valle*, a picture of William Elliot's farm in the Monaro region, comes close to rendering such an image in visual form.⁴⁶ It is highly relevant that this painting was produced by an untrained artist and betrays no knowledge of even the most basic techniques of composition. Rather, in the spirit of *Dixton Manor*, the picture is simply concerned to portray simultaneously every activity that occurs on the farm, and this involves eschewing perspective and emphasising the hectic energy of the scene rather than the dignity of its figures.

Nevertheless, there was one famous, if rather feeble, attempt to represent the noise of human activity in the tradition of formal landscape art: *My Harvest Home* by John Glover (Figure 4, below). Painted in 1835, four years after the artist's emigration to Tasmania, the picture depicts Glover's property, Patterdale, at Mills Plains. As Jeanette Hoorn has noted in an insightful study, the painting expresses the



Figure 4: John Glover, *My Harvest Home*, 1835, oil on canvas, 76 x 114 cm.
(Courtesy: Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart)

pride Glover felt in his new role as gentleman farmer, celebrates the benefits of European landownership and thus justifies the recent displacement of the local Aboriginal population.⁴⁷ In this way, the painting represents as harmonious a process that was anything but benign. Glover had himself not only benefited from the grubby business of allocating land grants to British settlers, but in 1832 actually offered a bribe to the Assistant Surveyor in an attempt to increase his holdings.⁴⁸

Concealing such unsavoury practical considerations, *My Harvest Home* is quite obviously an idealisation of rural labour in the old georgic manner, though it would certainly have been regarded as a realistic image. During the early nineteenth century, the growing association between vision and knowledge made painting a particularly privileged source of information. As one critic wrote in a positive review of a public exhibition of Glover's pictures in London in 1835, such 'pictures will convey a more correct idea than the mere reading of books of travels can convey. The eye takes in without trouble, and at a glance, what in description is wearisome to the ears, and tedious to the memory.'⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this particular painting abounds with literary tropes and allusions, translating the georgic myth of Happy Britannia into a colonial idiom, as if to make good on an earlier poet's prediction that the dark, silent forests of the Australian landscape would soon give way to:

... bright meadows, decked in livelier green,
The yellow corn-field, and the blossomed bean:
A hundred flocks o'er smiling pastures roam,
And hark! the music of the harvest-home!
Methinks I hear the hammer's busy sound,
The cheerful hum of human voices round;
The laughter, and the song that lightens toil,
Sung in the language of my native isle!⁵⁰

But there is no evidence of the festive clamour of the harvest home in the painting, which is appropriate given that Glover's harvest workers were not free labourers but assigned convicts—part of the land grab package. As David Hansen has indicated, the point seems to be underlined by the title.⁵¹ This is Glover's harvest home, a celebration of his property, his industry and his civilising influence on the landscape. In fact, the painting seems to be part of the artist's great mission, as he

conveyed to his friend and fellow artist George Boyes, 'to reform the Convicts ... and to direct the views and regulate the conduct of the rest of the population, till they shall have arrived at such a state of moral advancement that will make the idea of human perfection no longer Utopian'—a scheme which, in Glover's opinion, was to be achieved through the medium of art.⁵² And, from the evidence of the painting, this involved encouraging what the colonial historian, John West, called the 'quiet labor of a farm'.⁵³

In emigration literature of the period, there seems to have been a concern, mounting almost to an obsession, to impose on the Tasmanian natural environment the quiet, visual order associated with the refined landscape of Britain. Quietness, wrote one agriculturalist, was a 'virtue ... almost unknown in the island'.⁵⁴ Ex-convicts living on the shadowy margins of the frontier, asserted another, were 'always idle; their huts continually echoing with boisterous mirth';⁵⁵ similarly, servants performed their labour with more 'fuss and noise' than was 'necessary', treating cattle-mustering, for example, as sport rather than work—making the 'hills and valleys ... resound' with the 'tremendous cracking' of whips.⁵⁶ Even colonial cattle were condemned for not being 'quiet'.⁵⁷ All these writers agreed that this noise and confusion occurred because much of the frontier resembled one unsightly common, heightening rather than dissipating the 'uncivilized appearance of the country', to quote one prototypical commentator.⁵⁸ The solution, it was agreed, was to enclose, for this would not only improve the look of the land, but make it more productive and secure, promoting the quiet industry habitually associated with work discipline.⁵⁹

Of course, Glover failed to include such an unpicturesque object as a fence in his painting, but his labourers certainly seem to work in a quiet, orderly fashion. There is none of the chaotic energy of *Dixton Manor* in this colonial georgic image, and whereas the earlier British painting emphasises populousness, *My Harvest Home* focuses on the emptiness of the land in the distance, land bathed in a bright light, as if to call attention to the need to make this inscrutable country increasingly open to view. The arrangement of the foreground figures into a horizontal band stretching across the picture plane accentuates the orderliness of the labourers, though the scene is generally softer than Stubbs's *Haymakers*, as the harvest workers are represented in the languid style advocated by Gilpin in several of his works.

Accordingly, Glover's utopian scheme might be summarised as follows: labourers must work in silence, while the new colonial gentry must learn to appreciate the silence of landscape. This second aim is perhaps the point of his more overtly picturesque painting, *Patterdale Farm*, in which the single, solitary figure on the right acts as symbol of contemplation (see figure five, below). The trees on either side of the foreground function as *coulisses*, announcing that this is land to be seen in pictorial terms—it is, precisely, a *picture* of Glover's extensive property, laid out in a manner suggestive of the kind of estate design advanced by Uvedale Price, Gilpin's successor as chief exponent of the picturesque. For Price, as apparently for Glover, picturesque landscape taste had a moral as well as an aesthetic dimension, inspiring landowners to improve their land and reform their labourers so that their estates became suitable objects of contemplation. In this way, *Patterdale farm* gives expression to the notion that the quiet contemplation of landscape promoted not just the taste, but the humanity of the spectator—a testament to his refined conduct no less than his enlightened perception. But the painting also translates into an antipodean context the ideal of the English rural environment Glover jotted down in one of his sketchbooks as a place, quoting the poet Mark Akenside, to 'wander through calm recesses, led in silence by some powerful hand unseen.'⁶⁰

Given this positive valuation of silence, it is not surprising that colonists habitually described Australian scenery, or at least lightly wooded terrain, as resembling a landscape park.⁶¹ The landscape park was the supreme expression of the new



Figure 5: John Glover, *Patterdale Farm*, c. 1840, oil on canvas, 76.6 x 115.2 cm (Courtesy: Art Gallery of New South Wales)

proprietary attitude to nature, as landowners displayed their ability to control and rearrange the rural environment for the purpose of satisfying their own aesthetic pleasure. Accordingly, as well as giving the observer an air of gentility, to see the land as almost laid out like a nobleman's park was to see it laid out in a way which was amenable to being altered, reshaped, and ultimately brought under individual control. To quote one colonial horticulturalist, writing in the 1830s, 'I ... would recommend that sort of appropriation that gives a proprietor a command over the landscape visible from the windows of a mansion.'⁶² Clearly, the realisation of such a wholly visual conception of the land in three-dimensional form required a considerable degree of soundproofing, and the creation of this prototypically silent landscape in eighteenth-century Britain often involved the removal of villages, roads, workspaces and even church bells. As a model for understanding the Australian environment, it must therefore have contributed to the categorisation of many unfamiliar sorts of sound as undesirable noise, even if the silence of park-like scenery produced very much more pleasurable sensations than the 'melancholy feelings which the silence and solitude of ... wastes', according to Oxley, 'were calculated to inspire'.⁶³ In addition, while the value attributed to the parklike appearance of the natural environment may have stimulated an enthusiasm for native trees,⁶⁴ this was driven solely by an appreciation of their visual form—they were aesthetic objects, 'pictorial adjuncts', as one settler noted,⁶⁵ designed to please the eye of a particular kind of spectator. And in this sense, the colonial spectator was little different from the 'Man of Polite Imagination', famously described by Joseph Addison in the early eighteenth century as one who takes 'a Kind of Property in everything he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated Parts of Nature administer to his Pleasures'.⁶⁶

If the British landscape aesthetic enabled colonists to exercise authority over an alien land and its people, the Australian acoustic environment sometimes threatened to challenge the visual relation to nature that was the hallmark of this aesthetic. There is an intriguing account by James Ross of his first night in the bush on the way to take possession of his new settlement. During the silence of the evening, Ross writes, the woods begin to emit a 'sort of sylvan language'—owls moan and trees move, as if the 'wilds of Van Diemen's Land' have a 'sort of spectral mythology'—but he is quick to emphasise that this animistic perception is an

'illusion', confirmed the next day in the 'light of the sun'.⁶⁷ In the early modern period, woods were often conceived in a similar way as the home of talkative sylvan deities, especially by poets versed in the classical tradition. But this ancient notion had been superseded by the idea of landscape, which reconceived the value of trees and woodlands solely in terms of their visual appearance. In fact, the few poets who resurrected the notion of the forest as a living, acoustic space did so to attack the destruction of trees that resulted from the cult of the landscape park.

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³ John Dyer, *The Fleece*, London, R. & J. Dodsley, London, 1757, pp. 33–42.

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⁶ Thomas Watling, *Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay to his Aunt in Dumfries*, Ann Bell, Penrith, 1794, pp. 8–9.

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- ¹⁰ Jane Belfrage, 'The Great Australian Silence' in *Hearing Places: Sound, Place, Time, Culture*, ed. R. Bandt, M. Duffy and D. MacKinnon, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 43–9.
- ¹¹ For an account of this conundrum and a much fuller examination of the related shift in eighteenth-century images of the rural soundscape, see Peter Denney, "'The Sounds of Population Fail": Changing Perceptions of Rural Poverty and Plebeian Noise in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in *Experiences of Poverty in Late Medieval and Early Modern England and France*, ed. Anne Scott, Ashgate, Farnham, 2012, pp. 297–308.
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- ³⁹ James Atkinson, *An Account of the State of Agriculture and Grazing in New South Wales*, J. Cross, London, 1826, pp. 6–7.
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- ⁶⁶ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965, vol. III, p. 538.
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